

Antinomicity

Craig Warren Smith

Novella



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For Nietzsche, midday is not a moment of unification, when the sun embraces everything, but is, instead, presented as the moment when 'One turns to Two'.

— Alenka Zupančič

The light is like a kind of lengthy explanation - the light is like two thoughts occurring at once.

— Matthew Welton

Preface

I once overheard advice that to be a good poet you should spend years walking on uneven ground. Abrasions in the landscape, sloping declivities, meadows that turn into boulders – these are where one develops an ear for a line of text. A lifetime on concrete can only provide the most pedestrian of rhythms, too regular, like a metronome conducting a marching band. Given, then, that most of this book was written along level, constructed, synthetic trajectories, I could use this to justify prosodic weakness and flatline cadence, with the exception perhaps for one patch of treacherous ground that was the birth knell of this book.

There is a secluded beach in Newcastle that is only accessible at two entry points – the easiest way, but less reliable, is to curve around a narrow run of sand that links to an adjoining beach, but this is only available during a significantly low tide, and it feels as though this is occurring with diminishing frequency. The most reliable, but more fraught, access is to hop over a safety fence at the top of the cliff that shadows the beach, carefully making your way down an improvised walkway of flaking shale and loose stones.

I'm setting up the punchline here by foreshadowing the situation, as this is the path I took one late afternoon that saw me, seconds later, lose grip and dance atop a crescendo of rocks that rapidly became impatient with my stability, leading me to tumble, somersault, down the cliff for some handful of

unforgiving seconds until I thudded onto the sand.

While I sat in a nearby rockpool and bathed my wounds in salt water for the rest of the afternoon, my mind settled into its favourite posture, one of earnest reverie, cycling through recent and distant memories. It feels as though my reflections naturally slot and sequence within two broad categories - time spent with, and without, people. Mostly, I thought about a recent period with my children, and the sort of mirror they bracket around my waking life. A succession of events that occurred across no more than a week became the narrative of this short book, and in reading back what I have written it feels as though a very particular moment, developmentally, in the lives of my children, my wife and I, has, through the following thirty thousand words, been cast in an epoxy resin time capsule, like a family of insects preserved in amber. My son, for example, is different now in his language and his interests, just a few weeks on from when I finished writing this book, and yet I can witness with paternal tempo the way he was during the period described, through the eyes I was using at the time.

Dangling my bruised legs in the water, allowing the ocean waves to cleanse them and hoping that I hadn't suffered any long-term injuries, I thought too about the role that walking has in my life. If my memories are separated into occasions with and without people, then my daydreams are nearly exclusively

focused on places I can walk to. Psychogeography is what propels me forward, in both the physical and the metaphysical sense. One conclusion that I come to early on in this book is that walking in a conscious manner, with a view to observation, feels like a hunt for external landscapes that analogously mirror the internal landscape of subjectivity. If this book contains a detectable pulse, this idea might be the pump that regulates the flow.

How many ways are there, these days, to walk without walking, beyond prose. My daughter and I found a virtual reality program called Japaneland that allows you to float above the islands of Japan until you see somewhere you'd like to touch down, at which point you drop into a region that has been graphically rendered based on satellite mapping data. Then you get to, quote unquote, walk around the neighbourhood. It's like taking a stroll through a computer generated version of Google Street View, glazed with an algorithmic filter that make brick walls look as though they are made from caramel gelato.

Too, the internet today houses hundreds of thousands of walking videos, where somebody with a camera strapped to their chest moves about an English country lane or a Korean midnight metropolis, giving a first-person view of what it looks like to footfall those avenues. I have seen a video where somebody walks the same path that Friedrich Nietzsche used to hike when he

moved to the coastal town of Èze on the French Riviera. You see, in a way, a version of what Nietzsche might have seen, with whatever changes to the flora that a hundred and forty years have had on the landscape there. Of course, we can't really see what Nietzsche saw on his walks, because our inner world is not the same as his, but it's a nice idea.

What sort of poetry will this ambient psycho-geography bring about, of a new generation walking through virtual landscapes, where the ground is not uneven or level, but groundless. How will the pace of our phrasing be altered, has already been altered, and what will it do to memory and daydreaming. Already it provides a way to displace, to speculate on, our position in time, kneeling down in Kotohira and admiring a garden bed hologram of chrysanthemum that resets and loops every few minutes, forever now, for a while. What I hope is that the impact on us is completely unexpected and, more than this, feels utterly wrong. Art that works is art that fails, because intentions are arrows that hit when they miss. It is the accidents that resonate with us because the human element is subtracted - the revelation is in the breach.

In kinship with this consideration, this invitation for error, in parenting and in time, holding a hand younger than mine, with best foot forward, I begin.

I

The thing I like most about quiet, open, brutalist spaces like this, the TAFE here, exploring it with my son on a Saturday morning, his two-year-old little mind and body spontaneously engaging with the concrete stairs and ramps and sudden brick facades in a manner that gives language now to what I most like about being here, is that spaces like this seem more like a playground than a purpose-built playground.

They proffer genuine exploration in the root sense of the word, originally a hunter's term - to release a loud cry - from the Latin *ex* 'out' and from *plorare* 'to weep, cry', scouting an area by shouting aloud. But also how we get *plorare* from *pluere* as in 'to flow', which is what my son and I are doing here, walking across a slight brick elevation where two flagless poles are planted, onto a concrete walkway that curves between two sheer brick walls that rise from the mushrooms at their feet to the thin cloud streaks at their apogee, everything here made from either brick or concrete, until we find our way to the back of a building that seems to host education in metal forging.

There are metal tables, metal tubs filled with dozens of offcuts of solid metal cylinders and something the shape of a road bump, or perhaps not a road bump so much as a mantle clock, raised supports for the metal cylinders that my son and I roll along the ground and into puddles left by an overnight storm. This is how we play, how we flow, and while we don't *cry aloud* as we scout the area, preferring instead to talk gently to each other,

there is something to this etymology of the word *explore* that speaks to me - to weep, cry - not out of any sort of explicit sadness, but of a melancholy that takes residence with empathy, the way that memory is a bittersweet device, treating you to a remembrance of things past while reminding you that this is also where they live now, in an ever-fading capacity.

This is why I take so many photos when my son and I explore together, as many photos of him in the environment as the environment itself, but never of me, not a fan of the selfie. I try to capture a view of what I see when I feel grateful for consciousness, when I recognise how much this particular moment in time fits me like a glove. Watching my son roll metal cylinders across a



bitumen embankment into puddles filled with clouds, this is the shape of my mind cupping its hemisphere-like-hands together as empathy is poured in. And, because our hands are poor vessels for holding liquid it flows out between the crevices, hence why I take so many photos, to hold time in a state of suspended animation before the moment passes.

It feels to me that photography was not an accident but rather a decision made long ago within the structure of our brain. One-and-a-half million years ago when our brains developed a frontal lobe we learned how to reflect on our reality. The frontal lobe created a buffer between mind and matter, a delay between our unfiltered contact with the *real* and the way we subjectively process it through *replay*, our entire conscious experience of the world simply a reproduction of what has just occurred out there, earlier, in the unprocessed world beyond the language of our awareness. How could we not create photography to simulate this, just as we created dance, art, music and narrative before it, to synthesise this feeling. The brain said *I am a replay machine, so let us create another machine that can replay the replay, over and over again, to duplicate the duplicates*, and it was done.

When I take a quick glance through the photos geotagged to the location of the TAFE, I see six hundred and fifty-five results that fall into the following categories: photos of my son riding around the empty car parks (we only ever go when the campus is closed, like on a Sunday

morning or public holidays); photos of my dog careening around the footpaths; photos of the grass strip that divides one side of the campus from a creek beside it, a creek birthed by way of a metal filter that halts the flow of detritus from the drain that precedes it some twenty metres to the south east, the grass strip containing a wooden bench seat and tables that we, my son and I, sometimes take a break on; photos of the train line on the other side of the campus taking coal carriages back and forth from the loader at the port through here to the mines up north; photos of my son and occasionally my dog exploring the courtyards of buildings, spaces of infinite calm, tracts of concrete and grass necklaced by five-storey boxes of how many hundred thousand bricks (I think of those who spent months of their lives here placing one brick on top of another in such perfect sequence, a bricklayer who recently did some work for our family, brought out of retirement for one or two more jobs because, in his words, he is one of the few who still take pride in the job, who doesn't drop tools and speed away when the clock stops and couldn't care less what has been left behind, not that this is a comment on the current young cohort of builders, he says, it was the same in his day too, back in the seventies there were the ones who turned their back on a sloppy, unfinished job the moment they got a chance to hit the beach, not that he hasn't occasionally done that himself or got himself in a bit of trouble over time, the time he walked off a site and went AWOL for a couple of

days, drove down south to the snow to do some fishing in the lakes there, took how many cases of beer with him, fell asleep outside and would have frozen out there except for the immense need to urinate that woke him, and as he stood and relieved himself he looked up at the night sky and saw more stars in one place than he had ever seen in his life, and as intoxicated as he was he knew that those were a field of suns up there on some unintelligibly grand scale, and when he later returned home he felt an exhaustion in every part of his being like he'd never felt before which did not leave him for two years, so weary that he could not work for that whole time, so he took the phone off the hook and he and his wife survived on vegetables from their dusty little garden for twenty-four months before one day his energy returned, filling up his body again like an oven stoked with birch, and now here he is, still at it today, for one or two more jobs at the very least), and in the photographs of the courtyards I feel again the cool of the shadows, what I sometimes describe to myself as triangles of shade, always a relief across the Summer months when the TAFE is closed for nearly six straight weeks and we come here most mornings; photos of the grandstand that looks over the football oval where we climb up and down across the long timber benches, where I prompt my son to not climb on the corrugated roofing sheets that you can just walk straight out on from up here; and photos of the bridge that spans the creek in a midpoint between both sides of the campus, the fracture in



the closed system that allows the outside world into this quiet synthetic urban bubble, although to be fair there is a three-metre tall gate on the bridge that is almost always locked, especially when we are here during public holidays and weekends, and although we respect the role of the gate, riding up to it and bumping against it, making the metal gate rattle against the metal railings of the bridge so that it reverberates against the buildings here like a dissonant gong, percussively celebrating its function, there are others in the area who walk up to the gate and vault over it in order to make their way from the suburb on one side of the TAFE through to the other, as it is by far the most direct path to cross the area rather than walking all the way around the neighbouring streets, waiting for the train gates, and so on. Unless you were to walk up the dry part of the creek-turned-drain, which I often do alongside my dog, without my son.

The point at which the riverrun creek transitions into a dry, walkable storm-water drain is located beneath a rail bridge that carries both freight and passenger trains (but not coal, which travels on the other side of the TAFE for a brief moment before diverting to the highfields). My dog is comfortable with the rumble now as the trains pass overhead as we trespass the drain's broad, curved trajectories from one side of the city to the other. We don't start here, though. Our walk commences two kilometres back, two of the over five hundred kilometres of drain network across the city, expanding and contracting to varying degrees of width. The stretch we walk spans twenty metres across, but it narrows to only three or four metres as it slinks into the heights of the suburbs. Aside from a couple of bridges the drain is completely open air, seated some three metres below ground level with steep concrete walls, appearing somewhat like a baking tray or a marble run.

I first guided my dog down here after reading a book by a local author about his own walks through the drain with his dog. The book was written in the style of the English naturalists, the walking phenomenologists who made it their mission and their pleasure to observe the area in which they lived in service of folk scientific inquiry, learning the names of the plants, the variety of birds flitting about, recognising seasonal patterns. There is a section in the book where the author wanders beneath a fold of torn metal fencing into the disused gasworks that

runs alongside the storm-water drain, and he says that if asked by any remnant security or council workers why he was trespassing, he would simply say that his dog ran through the fence and that he was just going in to retrieve him. That was enough of a license for me to do the same.

Putting aside the joy of watching my dog run free through the length of drain as far as my vision carries, in which we have never in my years of doing this come across another dog down here, and only very occasionally another human traveller, my favourite part of the trek is a length of some five hundred metres that curves out of view from the nearest bridge or roadway, not visible from the rail line either, so that for some ten minutes of walking it is as if I am the only human on the planet. It is a solipsist's dream - on one side is the abandoned gasworks, on the other an abandoned fuel depot, both vacant of any activity, and growing along the ridge of the walls of the drain are these immense golden willows that hang low their branches and rustle like a nineteen-fifties mesh coin purse that softly pleat coins of jangled sunlight. Sometimes I lean back and watch the trees repeat their breeze-jostled sequence for twenty minutes while my dog finds a warm patch of ground to embrace.

One early morning some weeks back, beneath just this sort of gentle acceleration of sunlight, my dog and I clambered up the concrete walls of the drain at a point where a minor stormwater course joins up with the central passage and found ourselves on a raised spit of field that



backs onto the old gasworks. Not only backs onto but leads into, as a nearby security gate is wide open within the surrounding mesh fence line. Until the nineteen-eighties, the gasworks turned coal, through an oxidation process, into gas for the city. Now it sits vacant, a half dozen silos casting shadows over bullgrass and dust like a batch of giant, discarded sundials. Most of the stairwells attached to the side of the silos are wholly rusted away, but one remains intact, enough so that my dog and I can ascend to the top without any hassle.

On top of the silo I feel a sudden sensation to recline on its flat concrete lid and close my eyes, my dog already doing the same beside me, in a gesture that I can only describe as being analogously triggered by another mirrored circumstance some months prior. At that time I was, again, walking with my dog down the drain but in the opposite direction, towards an area



surrounded by sporting facilities. It was coming into twilight, but the sun was in a similar position to now, just on the opposite side of the sky, falling instead of rising. My dog leapt up the sides of the drain to get to the grass up there, preferring its soft texture beneath his paws after all that concrete, and when I followed him up I saw we were on a bank of turf behind a fence at the back of a soccer field. Soccer season was over for the year and the grounds were empty and inactive, but just like the gasworks, a security gate within the mesh fence had been left open. So, we walked in.

The grass was dry and wispy. It looked like it had been some weeks since it was last mown, and perhaps this unkempt appraisal beckoned my dog to freely bound around its quadrant. The soccer field is at the back of another sporting field, which is at the back of a tennis facility, so it is out of view of public

thoroughfare when not in use. This is not an excuse to just let a dog run around a private sporting facility, nor an excuse to wander into an abandoned gasworks, but sometimes moral problems give way to aesthetic solutions, especially when ambient evening light presses its weight over an expanse such as this. It had been a long day and a long month, and as I wandered onto the middle of the pitch, I sat down, looked up at the extinguished stadium lights, and thought about how peaceful it would be to fall back into the grass and go to sleep there. I woke up some two hours later in the dark, with a back pocket full of calls from my wife.

Forty or so minutes (who is counting) after deciding to recline on the top of the old silo, I opened my eyes and realised that the same thing had happened again, just as on the soccer field - I thought it would be nice to have a rest in an empty public space and unknowingly, without anticipation, fall asleep, but who would have thought I would see it through. I woke up facing the sky with a start and gripped the roof of the silo with clamped fingers, worried I was nearer the edge than I actually was. Slowly turning my head to the side, I locked eyes with my dog as he began reading my expression, which I immediately softened so as to not cause him any undue distress. Beyond his curled form, big brown bucket of fluff that he is, I looked across the pitched rooftops of nearby factories and warehouses, across the rail line, to the TAFE where I could see the

quarters my son and I covered there, from the creek to the car park, from one magnitude of bricks to another to the courtyards in their wake.

Gazing across a broad expanse of geography fills me with a sense of pending internal completeness. When you sit on the beach and look out to the ocean or sit on a porch and look across a field towards a distant mountain range - is the attraction a physical one, a resonance with symmetry, scale and colour, the lines of the environment, an impetus to action. Or rather, is it a metaphysical attraction, rendering the ocean and the field as metaphors, as an architecture of poetics that conjure feelings of freedom, infinity, the purity of faultless nature, and our kinship by association.

I have come to think of my relationship with landscape as one of subphysicality, beneath conscious association and physical connection, within enclaves of unintelligibility in a manner that positions these landscapes as analogous to the shape of the inland empire that is my subjectivity. These landscapes are not analogous in an abstract form within my mind; instead, they exist as my mind - subject as object. To look from the ceiling of the gas silo across an expanse of grassland and industry is to recognise the literal chemical, electrical silhouette of my own awareness. Environmental declivities and ascensions are carved into the fabric of my consciousness as into an inverted mirror, allowing landscape to pour into the negative space at the

foothold of my thoughts, providing to the body a simulation of what division without remainder might feel like.

During a recent afternoon at the TAFE, while my son and I were going up and down a stairwell that leads to a storage corridor beneath one of the buildings, I spotted a lady, in her sixties say, five foot-something, wiry and postured forthright, dressed in dark materials with patches of purple and green that I associate with tapestry, and what I saw her do was circle one of the gum trees standing fifty metres from where my son and I were on the stairwell, and she took a long eye-level gaze at the trunk of the tree before walking over to it, turn to face the other way, and let her body fall back into the tree where, somehow, her body perfectly fit. I had not looked at the tree previously, but based on what I was seeing, it appears that in one side of the tree there was a gap, perhaps where the tree had rotted away and left an inclination, that cupped her body as if she was born out of that very tree. When I saw her enact this scene, I thought, that's right, landscape as analogy, subject as object, she and the tree are two connected parts of a whole. She is the framework of subjectivity and the tree is the external world forged from its cast.

To talk about landscape and nature is to talk about oneself indirectly. Possibly it is the only manner in which to talk about oneself that is not socially repulsive. What I'm doing here, with this sort of writing and thinking

about walking, is initiating the technology through which I escape from populated society. I enjoy living in the city, but I tend to believe that a city reaches its functional peak once it becomes empty of people. Well, so long as it leaves for my son and me to talk its silent quarters, where the city becomes an instrument, and the sunlight that forms triangles beneath our footfalls the bow with which it is played, resonating ghost songs that are, of course, love songs in their most pure form.

The TAFE, in its small, closed system intimacy, is a postage stamp compared with the city of Newcastle, which expands like a pop-up picture book from the paper's edge on the north side of the TAFE. The dry storm-water drain that nestles here transitions with an abundance of water into Throsby Creek, a passage of industrial discharge that is, through local effort, becoming a little cleaner and more ecologically friendly each year. As a mark of this environmental progress, bull sharks have been spotted in the creek recently, the first in nearly a century since the last recorded shark attack was recorded there. A pathway that runs parallel to Throsby Creek takes you to where the Hunter River takes over, which, in our pop-up picture book, would be represented by a blue fold of paper structured not unlike a cathedral (in the same manner that Bach composed many of his late period organ pieces to structurally mirror the geometry of the churches they were to be performed in - the Hunter River at this juncture is steeped in a trajectory that could carry a bridal

party down the aisle with the groom's family on the ballast forged island where the coal ships unload, and the bride's on the mainland).

There is a public art sculpture along here that uses a sturdy foam material, painted blue, with a white sphere in the middle, to resemble undulating ripples of water moving out from the sphere. My son calls this sculpture 'the moon', as in the moon has fallen in the water. It is perfect for climbing and rolling over. When our intentions are to head into Newcastle for the day, we often start at the moon (and, finish up at the beach, another analogy, another mirror, for what is the moon but a beach in space being cupped by the cosmic ocean, how the first astronauts wore the uniforms of deep-sea divers).

Sometimes we see other children of a similar age to my son who stop here with their parents to play, and, at the risk of sounding like a parent who can only see his children through the keyhole of his pasture, I observe how



my son is often surprised by the antics of these other children. He doesn't put a name to their behaviours in the same way I do – acts of deception, of street-wise trickery, of manipulation, of insider jokes that fuel a specific frame of intellectual and physical violence – but he does take noticeable stock of the difference in them compared to what he is used to, to me, in comparison with our own play. While my son and I build nests of trust out of familial servitude that fosters deep care between us, these other children build something different – a bridge away from home towards new learnings that I can't replicate. Sure, that goes without saying, but they also bring a deprivation of innocence that my son still has in spades. This is because, other than growing up with his sister (ten years his elder), his experience with other children has not been plentiful at this point in his life. He sees them at playgrounds like this, of course, but he doesn't attend daycare or preschool yet. Instead, he spends time with our family and, when I am not working, with me, exploring the rise and fall of mostly bare city quarters.

On past the moon is the marina and the fisherman's co-operative. We stop behind the big exhaust fans on the side of the shed where heavily coated men drag crates of yellowfin and roughy, and we are taken with laughter by the blow of the fans as they push our hair seaward. Up the road is the new Interchange where the rail line meets the tram line, an anachronism depending on who you talk to; the whole city was once covered in tram lines connecting

suburbs before they were taken up to make way for the future. Who could have seen that the future would direct the city to remove the inner-city tract of train rail and replace it with, guess what, another tram line, only this time it doesn't connect the suburbs, it just goes up and down a spare kilometre of CBD. And then we have the trams themselves, in the beginning presented to the public wearing coats of crisp red and white paint draped across sleek mouldings, like a children's toy given extra care during mass production, only to then some weeks on have another coat folded around them - plastic wrapped advertisements for the coal mining industry, for car insurance, for banks. As you peer through the slits of transparency in the advertisements to the interior of the tram cars and see the mostly vacant seats, it is apparent what the real value of these city assets are.

But those are the words of an adult cynic and do not reflect the feelings of my city companion. My son's favourite tram is the one advertising a new kind of milk - 'there it is, the milk tram', he calls out as he sees it float from behind the boxing gymnasium into the clearway. The milk tram is an exciting piece of moving art that combines so many of my son's most revered preferences (mostly his love of milk and public transport), and it brings about another favourite experience, watching the signal crossing lights shine into action and listening to their metronomic ding. Now that I realise what the milk tram means to my son, I temper my criticisms, not because my complaints

are wrong, but because they're a bit gross in the light of other perspectival shades. It reminds me that at times I too love the trams, ads and all, when from a distance I see their evening lights trace a line through the city like a vintage educational animation of electricity flowing up a circuit; and what about the lovers who have spent all night on the beach, slunk against each other in the otherwise empty carriage as morning sunlight smudges the glass terrarium that contains them and fosters their photosynthesis, twin piles of sand at their feet; or the autonomous humanoid care drones, en route for aged care lunchtime visitations, comfortably seated, vibing in ambient defragmentation, screen savers displaying health care practices, recommended sleep schedules; or for all that, how about the lack of trams, the inversion of their



presence, on that one day when they were all locked away for compliance auditing and I walked the tracks, the white salted concrete tongue that rolls between hotels and bridges, drains and hospitals and art deco balustrades, theatres turned cinemas turned churches turned wasteland tundra, the last antique shop on the street, a custom electronics repair store that I took a broken MiniDisk player once, and a host of other sites and assorted memory prompts that I'd never previously had the opportunity to observe on foot from this vantage, a psychogeography born out of the temporary absence of trams, a non-place turned place for a little while.

The wedding district beyond the Interchange unfurls in snow-laced matrices across old multi-storey buildings, some with sheer glass facades that shimmer in laden dust light bearing rows of white dresses lined up on mannequins, looking from this angle like a giant game of Connect Four if all the disks were the same colour. Other buildings wear art deco concrete rendered caps painted salmon and tangerine, housing beneath them a couple of eateries peppered along the street that, ontologically speaking, only seem to vaguely exist at certain hours of the day and week. Around the corner is a pub not long in business, just opened before the pandemic. During lockdown they served supersized cocktails to people on the street, daiquiris in vases, ouzo in juice bottles, which someone commented was very European, although that seems a stretch.

A block up from here is a government building. They deal with where you can and can't dig, I believe. It is a structure made almost entirely of sand-toned pebblecrete, from the floors to the walls, and there are accessibility ramps that wrap around the building in all directions, a dream for my son to run and leap across, not unlike like a multi-storey hedge maze. We always end up here when no workers are around, probably on weekend mornings. My son likely thinks these buildings don't actually contain anything - no people, no objects - that they are shells like a fort made from cardboard, just walls, floor, and air, a space to be climbed over with no other function.

From here, we will often head to Civic Park, a stretch of parkland facing a doughnut-shaped building that was once our old Town Hall. The park sits at the feet of our city library and art gallery, the crucible of public frustration at one point after a row of fig trees that lined the street between the park and the library were set for removal by the city council. Environmental reports claimed weak root systems and risk of falling branches, while others gestured towards plans the council had to commercialise the space the figs currently occupied. After many months of protest and security guards patrolling the figs day and night to ensure no acts of urban terrorism were carried out, the figs were removed. A couple of years later, and I mention this with no political motive, a massive storm hit Newcastle and, ridiculously, I took to

my car with a camera to photograph the damage being wrought across the city, finding telegraph poles being thrown around, rooftops ejected from buildings like smokestacks casting off their lids, and a host of fig trees, dozens of those that remained in the surrounding streets, plucked out of the ground and dropped onto cars and homes. All told, hundreds of trees across the city were prone to the same demise. It was such a peculiar phenomenon to observe as so many fell in the same way - footpaths folded back onto themselves in waves of grass, the gravity of the fallen tree having activated this fold, resembling one of those books for young readers where you peel back layers to see the internal workings of earth and machinery.



Back at Civic Park, there is a large fountain - a water feature really, structured around a sculptural piece of decimated stone. It has been reported that during World War Two a secret plan was developed that, in the event of invading troops ever making it to Newcastle and being in a position to take control of our smelting facilities, a sequence of explosions could be initiated from the top of town to flatten the city, rendering our factories, our entire infrastructure, impossible to be weaponised against the rest of the country. This fountain sculpture is, to my eyes, a vision of what might be left of Newcastle after this self-destruction was actioned, a broken symphony of splintered rock consumed by ocean waves. However, as with the milk trams, this is not what my little friend sees. He sees a motorised water toy set to motion by an engine room that sparks infinite curiosity. Some fifteen metres from the fountain, a narrow staircase of some dozen steps descend into the earth, becoming ever noisier, leading to a metal door we have never seen open. This must, we conclude, lead to the controls and the motor that keep the fountain running, although what sits behind the door is ultimately a mystery to both of us. A mystery we joyfully return to, week after week.

The next patch of town we wander into is where remembered dreams of my boyhood start to take form, where my steps from thirty years ago begin to overlap, ghost-like, with those of my son. A curve on King and Hunter Street brings about an old cinema that has been

sitting empty for many years. You can look through the windows at movie posters from the last decade, a time capsule left unburied. I loved to go here as a lad, the dark carpet, the heavy burgundy curtains, the firm leather seats with the gold tacks holding everything in place. Occasionally I wonder what it would take to get inside and look around. But not now, not with my son. I remember my father telling me how many cinemas, ‘picture palaces’, used to exist around town. He and his mates would get on their bikes and, for some fractional coin currency no longer in circulation, would visit several across a single day, seeing a different cowboy movie at each. The original cinema buildings held Wurlitzer organs and orchestras, replaced over time by an empty field of space between the big screen and the first row of chairs where young children run around when they get bored, a non-space like those trams tracks without trams, an inversion of solid form, a lady cradling her body into the divot of a tree, a ghost song that disintegrates all memory of its melody upon waking up, realising that thirty years hence have brought you back here again.

Memories are never singular but rather always in the plural. There is no single *memory*, like an individual card pulled from a deck, but instead they exist as a multitude that fan out and lay across each other, like petals of a particularly transparent quality, the light of attentive recollection filtering through their combined hues. It is as if film negatives were laid one on top of the other to create

an entirely new composite scene. Those individual scenes do not exist - only the assembled collage is real. The piling up of old memories produces new ones, forever changing how we see the past, like when we hear news about a neighbour that permanently alters our every perception of them. The past is always a spontaneous product of the present, constructed in an instant of reflection - not a chance use of the term, *reflection* - the surface of our mind bouncing light against the smudged layers of our plate glass memories, mirroring back to us a scene never before depicted that looks like something we've always known.

I remember the Angus Steak House a block up and across the road from the cinema. It housed a model train track pinned alongside the internal wall of the restaurant, running from the kitchen to the booths of lucky diners that sat alongside the rail line, a steam train puffing to-and-fro hauling carriages that gripped plates of warm garlic bread. I remember too another little train (ever the enthusiast, like my little man) on a track suspended around a tall iron pillar in a shopping arcade just a bit further up the street. The track ran through a mantle clock on one side of the rail and beneath a heavy bell suspended opposite. If my memory is correct, I believe the train used to sit within a tunnel cut inside the base of the mantle clock until the hands hit the hour mark. At this time, the train would leave its tunnel and drive out and strike the bell somehow (did the momentum of something attached to the train drive beneath the bell and hit it as it passed, or was it something



more mechanical striking the bell, or did it actually hit the bell at all - the arcade was within a clear audible trajectory of the clock at Town Hall that strikes every hour, perhaps the bell was just ornamental and what we were actually hearing was the Town Hall bell).

As we walk this quarter, disintegrating with every step as multistory car-parks are replaced with apartment buildings, department stores replaced with apartment buildings, old apartment buildings replaced with apartment buildings (everywhere to live and nowhere to go), I experience a projected Proustian moment where I believe I can smell biscuits from the Cookieman section of David Jones, surely twenty years since it existed, not within my daughter's thirteen year life-span at the very

least or I would have taken her there to taste the jam drop shortbread, the biscuits with the yellow or green or red coloured lollies, the dotty cookies with chocolate buttons covered in hundreds and thousands that they used to call 'jewels'. I used to go there with my parents, my mother, when I was say seven or eight, to select a biscuit when I was in the vicinity. The whole David Jones building was special, I remember twenty years hence Christmas season when my wife and I would go there for family gifts, the beautiful displays of jewellery, books, clothing, the only real store in the city for these sort of purchases, thirty kilometres from the nearest massive suburban shopping centres that have come to dominate the period. I used to walk the car-park alone on a weekend morning, winding up the on-ramps, overlooking the city, the harbour, the old abandoned Victoria Theatre.

And then the whole place shut down. One earthquake was it all it took to dismantle the history of the CBD and send the future out to the suburbs. David Jones sealed off its doors with sheets of plywood, a process of memory evacuation initialised to make room for non-memories, new spaces that don't harbour the unseemly noise of active remembrance. And yet of course some noise was left behind, not only within my own skull but within the artistic pursuits of local talents, one oil painter, a UK emigrant like so many of our best local creatives, who gained access to the internal corridors of the David Jones building, the expansive tiled zones where

whitegoods and children's clothing were once stationed beneath mighty air conditioning ducts, captured now in poppyseed and walnut, impasto slabs of dust, of collapsed shelving, of stacked chairs and cash registers left fallen in a corner pile, of arched windows looking out to the sea, yet when you press your face to the canvas the windows show nothing, no world behind the painted portal, like the wall of a memory that says no more data available, a visualisation of the voice on the old cassette tape that says 'this is the end of Side A, turn the tape over' to restart the memory from the beginning, or rather not the beginning but the other side, with a younger version of yourself.

I mentioned UK emigrants just now because it's curious how many of the local artists and writers who most inspire the way I consider Newcastle came from the Isles. The author I referenced at the outset who wrote about following his dog into the gasworks as a subterfuge for his own explorations, the artist above who paints the remnant scenery of expired department stores, and another artist who created an illustrated catalogue of a hundred mailboxes from around these streets and the streets of my home, who draws the same ephemera disjecta that draws me in too, the bent wire fences of the velodrome, the anonymous walls of how many bricks that comprise the telephone exchange, the foliage of fig trees cut through the middle by the council to make room for powerlines passing through, they burrow into the globe of leaves turning full circles into caves, like the cave of the mantle

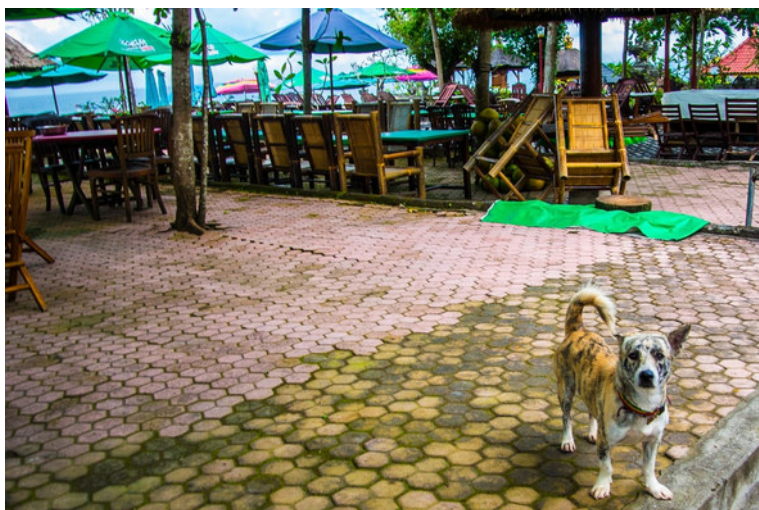
clock the little track would wait in for the hour mark (I've just remembered more on this, it was not the train that struck the bell, but rather there was the figure of a miner on a cart pulled behind the train that would strike the bell with a pick axe), like the metal offcuts found at the TAFE.

There are more UK artists that come to mind as well, a photographer who would, until 2018, capture similar scenes as just recounted and post them online, and a local historian I became friends with who moved here in her seventies and began researching the place in order to connect more deeply with her new home, to understand it a way that some locals might but most do not, compensation in a way for being the outsider. I wonder if it is a result of being in a new, yet not completely unfamiliar, environment that sparks the creative urge to connect and render a new home in a way that fosters a synthesised familiarity there, or rather perhaps it is that travellers can bring with them their own particular enterprising skills, particularly artisan capacities, that gesture them into writing books and painting canvases about what else but the streets they wander every morning as they take stock of where they have ended up.

Travel for me was never something I yearned for, even as my close friends began making plans towards the end of high school, during university, to go to Europe or explore South-East Asia. I dug my heels in, what more could you want than what we have here, take a look around, the entire universe is stationed in Newcastle, like

that Kafka quote about how you don't need to go to exotic locations to find the world, you just have to put yourself at your desk, still and alone, and the whole world will offer itself up to you. That being said, when I did start to travel as part of work opportunities I relished the new experiences. On my first overseas trip for a conference in Bali I couldn't quite believe I was standing on the ground of another country, across an ocean, an entirely different land mass. I still feel the uncanny sensation today, ten years on, recalling how I turned back on the Denpasar runway to see the Indian Ocean in a mist of afternoon cyan wonder. After being driven to the conference centre in the grove of some stunning tropical paradise, I immediately transgressed the work health and safety governance of the trip by leaving the boundaries of the location. I can remember pushing through a thicket of dense palms fronds on the edges of the venue and finding a cow in a wooden cage there, and beyond this some paved steps that lead up to a cliffside restaurant, not open at the time and possibly closed for the season, where a little collared dog, speckled with black stripes on his caramel head and back, came up and followed me around. Wherever I travelled across the following decade, I always seemed to stumble into the same sort of solitary quarters I favour at home.

In New Zealand it was midnight in Christchurch, not long after the terrible earthquake that devastated the city, walking around the dozens of public artworks erected



to commemorate the event and provide a space for community and memory to harmonise. I remember giant lounge chairs made from astroturf, a tower of multicoloured shipping containers, miniature golf courses with plastic funnels connecting holes between the remnants of fallen church domes, and those few remaining buildings wrapped in brown paper, like a bandage, on immense vacant plots of land. In China, it was arriving beneath a Christmas tree at the Peace Hotel in the Bund region in the middle of the night, and minutes later dreaming that I had missed the plane to China only to shock myself out of sleep and realise all was well, I was there. A walk through Old Shanghai after breakfast beneath immense coils of electrical cables suspended from the corners of stone block businesses, sharing the

alleyways with little dogs wearing ballet shoes and tutus. Unable to find my way across the Huangpu River, I kept taking the sightseeing tunnel tour that puts you in a futuristic pod and shoots you from one side of the river to the other through a rainbow grid of lights, with an accompanying voiceover that describes that geological formation of the earth. Later, in Songjiang, I slept in a hospital for a week and walked the surrounding fields during the day. I visited a shopping centre one afternoon only to find that all the shops were an illusion - all the shopfronts were painted with pretend bakeries and bookstores. They were positioned beneath the shadow of infinitely replicated apartment buildings, fifty storeys high, which had, near the access gates at their base, little red signs bearing an illustration of Lenin on them with a red cross over the top, *no Leninists allowed*. I saw a little schoolhouse on one of my walks, a kilometre or two from a hotel wearing large sculpted letters reading GOLF on its front, that I tried without success to find later on a digital map. When I took a photo of the schoolhouse from a distance, it was a lovely scene positioned amongst an intersection of hill, field, river and empty superhighway, but the photo has since been lost.

When I visited Dubai, a place built for the touristic experience, I inadvertently found myself again in peopleless spaces. After learning that Dubai was not a walkable city, I asked a taxi to take me to where I thought was a spice souk was located, but the directions I gave

took me to a barren waterfront area with flat tangerine-toned buildings that housed art galleries and museum attractions, all closed while I was there. I walked the area for two hours and found a rotating teacup ride, not in use, a wet floor sign in the shape of a banana, a statue of a robot made out of folded sheets of tin, and a river that seemed to display, across the water, a mirror image of the sights found here. Besides the taxi driver who dropped me off and another who picked me up, I didn't see another person for the entire outing.

There were similar experiences in South Africa and Singapore – flying into major cities, but where are the people, how did I end up in the only empty quarter. This further stoked in me the joy of travelling somewhere new



and, during the period before or after my work commitments, walking the urban and semi-rural trajectories that took me to areas in which I felt like I'd fallen off the map, as if I've blinked and awaken in a parallel version of the place in which you're the only remaining soul. It is the same around Australia – notably, recently, Deloraine in Tasmania (the rail line beside the timber mill, the suspension bridge over the river, platypus diving between duck feet), Wee Waa (the red fields with kangaroo tracks where Daft Punk once performed, enormous trucks carrying hay bales the size of houses) and Inverell (ghost mist on Winter morning streets, candelabra street lights becoming alchemical, turning liquid vapour into frenetic gold sparks) in New South Wales, and just the other month to Glenelg in South Australia, where I travelled and left my home for the first time since my son was born, previously excused from doing so by flight bans during pandemic lockdown. I wrote a poem about processing being absent from him, of which the first couple of stanzas (in which, like a moth, I'm forever spellbound by light of any sort), go:

By the time I have arrived in the hotel room
and pushed through the gauze curtains
to see the sun, flat from this angle, sink within
minutes behind its own ribbon of gauze,
a distant cloudscape of embarrassed whisper,
I am some half day absent your little face.

You turned three on Saturday, likely the first
birthday that carried some resonance
to separate it from all the other playful days.
But now I am here with you over there,
the first time since your birth that work travel
has become inescapable, try as I have.

To fight the grief when you are not pressed
to me tonight, not 'morrow on bikes to
spin off into isometric concrete wonders,
I have committed to take witness re:
what is in your father's head (at thirty eight)
as I footfall this beachside destination,

as I see this sun fall into the ocean, I swear
it flickered like a light bulb on a bad
circuit, backlighting clouds when it touched
down into the ocean. Tomorrow the
newspapers will talk about an energy crisis
with not enough power on the grid,

not a coincidence in my eyes, just like the
skyline here painted in vibrant hues, it
is not saturated by chance, no - these reds,
akin your highly oxygenated blood
spilled through so many skinned knees,
they glow via Tongan volcanic dust.

Some of the road trips my wife and I took together, before our son was born and when our daughter was old enough to stay with family for a couple of nights, reveal a counterpoint between the kind of solitary spaces that urbanism brings in comparison with more pastoral locations. On one of our drives up north, we stopped at Bowling Alley Point and took a stroll up Peel River from the Chaffey Dam. It began to rain, and we had to refuge in a little weatherboard church on a hill (the roof of our car had a bad leak and gave no shelter). Inside, bathed in faint lemon rainlight that struggled to cast through a dusty window arched around a depiction of a fallen gum tree, we found a crossword puzzle in a newspaper beside the pulpit that we completed with a golf scorecard pencil. Back in the car, with towels on the seats, we ascended a mountain range, the name of which I cannot recall. When we reached the top, we pulled the car over to examine a kaleidoscope of tiny green butterflies that were, to my wife's concern, hovering over the edge of the mountain (she didn't feel they should risk being over such a high vertical drop, even though it seemed visually impossible to consider that their infinitely buoyant jostling would ever cease). I thought I could hear water lapping somewhere nearby, behind the car perhaps, and after we marched through some hundred metres of bushland away from the edge of the mountain, we found a tree-lined lake. It must have just been rainfall in an immense basin, like a volcanic crater, but it was stunning to stand and look at,

thinking about how high up it was, very nearly amongst the clouds that filled it up.

That night, we reached our accommodation in a small regional village, although not so small that it didn't have a cinema in a hall with around twenty white plastic picnic chairs set up in front of the screen. It sort of looked like a movie drive-in had a house built around it. The thing that really got our attention, though, was the retro arcade attached to the side of the cinema, through an aluminium security door with a torn flyscreen, into a sunroom with four or five machines from forty years ago. I can't remember them all except that we played Golden Axe together for a good hour and then took turns on a Volley pinball machine (we were thrilled by the real mechanical action of the bumpers, the chain reactions that caused an immediate snap reflex the moment one of the hypotenuse pads were hit by a ball, like when a doctor uses a little hammer on the tendon in your knee to make your leg kick up).

So what is to be considered here about the aesthetic differences, or rather what I described earlier as a subphysicality, analogous to the shape of the inland empire of my subjectivity, that these different environments elicit - the riparian scrubland tundra of Bowling Alley Point (I always think of Salinger's unpublished story 'An Ocean Full of Bowling Balls'), the butterflies and the crater filled with rainwater, compared with the built environment, the cinema and the arcade, the

rows of white plastic chairs. Is there a difference, or are they the same environments but on separated points on a singular timeline - one day, there is a pinball machine; the next, it is a gravel path that, when you kick a particular rock, the ground reflexively jolts the rock right back at you. Or perhaps both spaces fulfil different solitary needs. The built environment is a sign that someone was once there to build the place and had a reason for it to exist, even though it perhaps no longer serves a purpose. I think of that poem of Larkin's where grass grows up through the floor of a church, deer now grazing there. Is it a post-human peace, an opportunity to enjoy the cultural remnants of humanity without people causing any further harm, aside from the witness there to see the last of it all, and if so, what does that say about me and my reasons for seeking these places out. It is easier to justify being alone with nature; it sounds so healthy, connecting with the biological heart of it all, the sunshine, the water, the peaceful pathways that let your mind disperse like the seeds of a dandelion. For me, the peak sensation of landscape is the fusion of these two spaces - the bomb shelter in the forest, the transmission towers amongst the wheat fields. And if you'll excuse another poetic aside, thinking now about these scenes reminds me of a walk I took with my dog recently through just such an area, it goes:

There is always a hole in a fence,
eventually, that someone else has made.
Local hoodlums, is that still the word,
anticipated my palliate arrival with pliers,
somewhere to smoke or shoot up or shag,
is that still a word, but I'm thankful all
the same because there is nowhere else
in the city or the neighbourhood, is that
still a thing, to walk my dog today, for
all the good spots are taken and I don't
trust him to be social with other dogs,
the only real trick I've ever taught him.

The fence hole is in an industrial
estate still being established, there is an
unused quarter, is that still a thing, where
I watch my dog run through yellow grass,
or not so much run as bound, is that the
word because it seems like he's doing the
very opposite of being bound, because
giving a dog the opportunity to run free is
a handsome thing but also reminds you of
how this instinct is mostly restricted, but
not today my friend because just look at
where we have managed to find ourselves:

northward is nothing but sky,
I don't mean straight above my head,
although that is also nothing, I mean to
the horizon, just some arm of a crane like
a twig from this distance, it pivots in an arc
like the gnomon of a sundial, pointing now
towards the old gun barrel radio station on
the hill that still distributes a signal, low
powered, someone messing around with
pirate frequencies, I know because I hear
directions being read by a man wearing
what sounds like a heavily pillared jumper.

Transmission towers daisy
chained by melancholy strings like
Elgar would have liked seeing bowed,
not heard necessarily, the visual would
have been enough as it is now, seeing
them become small as I back up towards
the fence line, who knew the ground
here would be so wet, is this what it has
come to, seeking out sunken fields in a
zone beyond the reason of townships,
through a hole in a fence (ok I admit it
was me who made the incision, is that

still a thing, admission, admission
into this area, but I jest), somewhere for
my dog to go unfettered, to walk without
neighbours, to see cranes and grass and
power pylons and rusted buildings on
the hill beneath Tuesday dry sunlight,
and while we need to turn back because
we have run out of solid ground, there
will be another day when we will return,
not phased by how messy this sludge
wander was, the nettles from the grass
pinned to us saying 'take me with you'.

That line towards the start of the poem, 'I don't
trust him to be social with other dogs, the only real trick
I've ever taught him' is nothing if not a confession of the



kind I mentioned at the outset with regards to the sort of social exclusion these places offer me when my son and I explore the city together. And I'll say something else on this, something of a revelation that has just come to me as I walk with my son down Watt Street (its actual name, not a reference to the Beckett novel), passing by a quiet building I've always wondered about, an ex-services club that I can't be sure is still in operation. My first thought on seeing the building is that sense of query, wanting to know more about the place, what it's like inside, and the lives of those who go into such a seemingly, to my narrow field of observation, unoccupied space. And from there, I consider how I can learn more about it - can I wander out the back and look at the car park, and what if I put my face up to the window to peer through the curtains, or perhaps I can loiter in the lobby for a moment if the front door ever opens. What has never occurred to me, at least not in these last couple of years, is that I could ask about becoming a member of this club. Why not - I'm a decent, law-abiding citizen (well, peering through windows aside) who can surely afford an annual membership to a place like this. So why is my first instinct that I'm not allowed inside.

You could point to childhood factors, always a decent place to start. Some of my most cherished youthful memories are from when my parents took care of businesses after hours. As an only child, and one who didn't contribute to the tasks my parents were involved in, I had time to myself for an evening to wander around

wherever we were - for a period, it was a local council Information Centre with a car park I used to explore, climbing on concrete barricades and brick walls, walking down a tree-lined street beside a holiday caravan park that faced a twilight beach. Later, a public library, waiting for the vast interior to replace void with light as the power came on. I would walk up and down the stairwells, push into study rooms and administration areas, look through the shelves (I remember I was around nine when I found a book on Jungian psychology and the Australian landscape, of which I understood absolutely nothing, and yet something gleaned from the front and back covers stuck with me like a talisman for future discovery). There are many other locations as well that flit across my memory - an early childcare centre where I handled the peeling boxes of board games (why do I think of those buildings in Christchurch when I remember this); a garden in which I ran down a steep grass declivity into a greenhouse filled with hanging orchids; the garage of a local boxing historian that contained a poem about the horrors of the Vietnam War.

But is this really where my sensibility for tracts of urban solitude was developed, or is there a more visceral root. What about my stutter, significant as a child but less so now, what role did it play in all of this. Not necessarily as an isolating factor - it never stopped me from making friends - but what I believe it did do, and I think this is getting more to the heart of what I'm driving at here, is it

taught me about different routes to achieve an outcome. On the one hand, there are the temporal strategies that stuttering teaches you, that you need to have around four or five different sentence options in your head at any one time that you can quickly divert to in order to finish a thought in case the original sentence begins to fail you. But the more important lesson for me is stuttering teaches you that while you might not succeed by going down the first, most obvious route, there are other possibilities, and perhaps those other possibilities are more statistically in your favour.

What do I mean by this - well, in class at school, you might not be able to provide an answer aloud to the teacher; but instead, you can ponder the solution for longer, keep it in your head to gestate, and then perhaps you write down the answer, not the answer you initially came up with but a more astute insight, developing a capacity for concentrated thought in lieu of being able to spontaneously get a response out of your mouth. I believe I intuited something from this position early on, the strategic options afforded to the outsider to find success via alternate paths. Instead of learning the piano, I learned the organ, a fast-track solution in some ways to standing out in your field (instead of being an average pianist amongst a sea of millions of other average pianists, you are an average organist in the sea of barely anybody else, and suddenly the word average doesn't seem so fitting). Instead of teaching in a mainstream school, I taught in a

special education environment. Was this just a numbers game, striking better odds at getting a job in a less populated field, or was there something more to it, an allegiance to others outside the majority. I'm drawing a bow here from being an only child with a stutter who explored after-hours council buildings to someone who developed an outsider mentality for success derived from anywhere the majority was not, through to where I am now, a father walking his son past an ex-services club and realising for the first time that he could become a member of that club if he just went in and asked.

I watch my son dance in a puddle on the footpath outside, and I get a flashback to my daughter doing the same thing ten years ago when she was the same age, in this exact spot, walking this same ground, and how we walked out the back of the club to the car park to pick seedpods from the ground. At thirteen, I wonder what I have taught her about being an insider and being an outsider, about being in the realm of people or being nestled in solitude by brutalist architecture, or being amongst teeming thousands cheering and syncing up in immense collective harmony compared with walking down a storm-water drain with your dog. In a twist on the old Groucho Marx joke, have I taught her that she can be a member of club that would accept someone like her. As I take my son's hand and walk inside the ex-services club, wiping our feet at the door so we don't muddy the lush red carpet within, I think about my plans for the weekend and

how there might be somewhere out of town, not up the coast but down towards Sydney, that might provide a different landscape to calibrate some of these ideas. A bookstore in the Sydney CBD has a collection of books my daughter has been talking about lately. I think it's time for a trip.



II

The train journey from Newcastle to Sydney takes around two and a half hours, and we are lucky to have secured a Daysitter compartment on the regional train. With three seats it fits the two of us comfortably. My daughter sits against the window facing outside the train while I sit against the window facing the aisle where a rail guard walks back and forth. The restaurant car is open, and I buy my daughter a packet of chips and a bottle of water. Saying restaurant car feels anachronistic, or like I'm referencing an exotic travel feature from a rail journey far removed from here, and yet here it is, a restaurant car on a train between Newcastle and Sydney.

I've only been aware of this regional rail for the past two years, and this is only the second time I've used it. The first time was when I was looking for a way to travel home from Sydney just after the pandemic first hit Australia. Worried about being on one of the regular, crowded trains where I would be breathing directly into the faces of fellow travellers, I found out about the regional rail by chance (a sign on the platform perhaps, *booked seats only*, and I likely went from there). That was two years ago, and since then I have not returned to Sydney. I avoided going anywhere, certainly not to populated areas anyway. All of my work travel ceased. Each weekday I would wake, walk through the yard to my home office - a freestanding building that we constructed to replace an old, decrepit garage - and sit

in a chair that, through dusty windows, drew in the morning sunlight. From there, I would work until afternoon, then walk back through the yard to the house. A hermetic existence, to be sure, but one that I relished.

Tragic human toll aside, I could have readily maintained a pandemic lifestyle. Reducing people's movement throughout the neighbourhood made every weekday feel like Sunday. You could ride your bike down the middle of the road and not see a car for a good ten minutes. But that's me, approaching forty, finished with society. It was not necessarily the same experience for my daughter, eleven when the pandemic began and thirteen when routines from the before-times returned. That's part of what is fuelling this trip to Sydney, to get out of the house, out of the neighbourhood, to check out big bookstores and be amongst the populace again. She wants Sailor Moon manga, and for that, you have to head to the big smoke.

Through Wondabyne and past the only railway station in Australia that is inaccessible by road, we look across Mullet Creek towards the mountain opposite, about which my daughter informs me that etched into a portion of its rocks are Egyptian-themed glyphs, assumed now to be the result of a practical joker from the 1920s imitating the cultural excitement about the boy king, Tutankhamun, at the time his tomb was found. My daughter has recently been up there on a walk of Darkinjung country, eager to connect with this part of



her cultural heritage and feel part of a more significant historic trajectory than can otherwise be found within the boundaries of our yard. She sits, eats her chips, and looks across the water before asking if we can play some music, softly, in our Daysitter compartment.

The track she plays hears a synthetic voice, perhaps two different voices, sing a skittering melody over bubblegum pop beats. She says the style of music is called Vocaloid, named after a piece of software that imitates singing. You type in lyrics, choose the notes, adjust the parameters, hit play and then you have your soprano. She says there are different characters for the voices you can choose from, Japanese anime-styled men and women created to give a face to each voice, each

line of code. I remember seeing these now, watching a video from ten years ago of a virtual performance given on stage at a concert in Tokyo, a hologram of a digital girl projected onto a stage in front of thousands of young people waving neon rods in sync with the tunes. That's the thing, my daughter says, these songs are old now, Vocaloid peaked ten years ago. Virtual concerts of hologram pop stars using their artificial vocal cords to sing impossible songs are so yesterday. But she has only just discovered them, the equivalent to me hearing Don't Dream It's Over by Crowded House in 1996 when I was thirteen, a decade after its release. She is nostalgic, at thirteen, for the most futuristic music imaginable, because its wave has already crested.

It's fitting that I picked a 1980s song to reference just now because the tune my daughter is playing abruptly makes me feel nostalgic for my childhood during that period, or perhaps just a little bit later, the first years of the 90s. Something about the interplay of the melody with these twinkling synthesisers, the way they sparkle in major chromatic runs like little fireworks released every four beats. It brings to my mind a series of overlapping musical memories.

The first is the background music to a stage of the game Sonic the Hedgehog. Starlight Zone, the stage was called. I can see it now - black backdrop with blinking stars forged out of white pixels fading in and out of the sky, floating khaki platforms for the blue hedgehog to spin

across, and the music, four repetitious notes that first step up two tones and then bounce up an octave and trip back down a semi-tone, followed by a flurry of jazzy syncopated cocktail chords, nearly Bossanova infused (or am I just thinking that because now I'm thinking of space and I'm associating it with supernova).

My second memory that connects here is the Starlight Room on the second floor of a local bistro and leagues club in our area. These days I see it as just another conference room, but when I was around six or seven I walked up around the turn of its red velvet staircase, possibly not even getting beyond the stairs because I was only allowed to walk up a little of the way by myself while my parents were talking with grandparents on the landing below, and I witnessed, hewn within the ceiling, a stunning galaxy of little pulsating lights that gave the Starlight Room its name. There was muzak playing that I cannot precisely recall other than to say I would not be surprised if it was the exact backing track for what we're listening to now.

The third connecting musical memory is an advertisement for an album by the group Simply Red that, for a season of my childhood, seemed to air between every cartoon I watched. One particular song, Stars, I can remember being highlighted on the television advert, and while there seems little musical connection between that song and this Vocaloid tune, there is something about the melody that resonates here, and it feels as though the

muzak I cannot recall from the stairwell of the Starlight Room would naturally interpolate here as well.

My final musical memory illuminated by this tune is another advertisement, or more accurately, a trailer for a film that must have been on a video cassette that I watched around this same period, for *The Jetsons Movie*, based on the 1960s cartoon about a family who lives in the future with flying cars and a robot housemaid. There is a moment in the trailer that I recall where a song is announced, the voice-over says something like 'Featuring a new original song by' some group, and then this electro-clash pop rock tune comes on while the daughter of the Jetson family, Judy, dances around a sparkly cave with a blue alien teenager wielding an electric guitar. I think there are also little fluffy alien animals, like hamsters and hedgehogs, who gaze out from the cave depths, watching the dance performance which elevates Judy and the blue teenager up through the area without regard for the conventions of gravity.

All of these associations spontaneously come to me after the first verse of the Vocaloid song, inspired not by the lyrics, which I cannot decipher, but from the tone of the synthesisers that twinkle and sparkle; they have a sharp angle to them like a triangle wave, partnered with the jolting shape of the melodies they're forming. When I ask my daughter what this song is called, she says Gemini. The star constellation for the cosmic twins, which of course, makes perfect sense - an interstellar analogy. On

one side is this music we're listening to; on the other, there are musical memories that conceptually mirror the song's reflexive sensory associations, forged at this moment as a single glittering musical experience that, like all analogies, see two become one.

After we listen to Gemini, my daughter plays the song again, but this time covered, sung by a human. They have a good voice, hit all the correct pitches and sing the fast bits with precision, but it sounds different and not in the obvious way you'd expect. Discourse on the digital production of art is often with deference to the superiority of the human spirit in the act of creation; even as artificially intelligent art algorithms win awards over their human competitors, there is the persistent background reminder that it was a human who wrote the code that made the robots draw and speak, so at heart, all art is still a human creation. And that's fine, but it isn't the most interesting part about listening to this human voice and comparing it with the software we just heard.

It strikes me that, within this Gemini song, the angle of the melodies the human is singing makes the music sound more artificial than when the software was performing it. Listening to the way the notes jump half octaves up and down, trilling a quaver before running down a flurry of descending grace notes - when they fly out of the mouth of the robot they sound so natural, like a songbird on a branch greeting the morning star, and yet from the tongue of this human the same notes sound

robotic. I wonder what the term for this phenomenon is – we call it the 'uncanny valley' when a robot tries to act like a human but doesn't entirely sell the performance, but what about the opposite, when the robot sings notes that are written for it and sound more like a product of nature than when the human performs the same task. And that's the key, that the music was written *for* the robot, that's what creates the effect, which leads me to wonder what other parts of art and society and language and democracy and thought will be written for robots to perform in a state of natural grace in ways that humans will come up short against. When I say 'will be written', I should be saying 'will continue to be written'. At work when I make a mistake, or someone else does, I say, 'well, it's just a sign that the robots haven't taken over yet; there is still room for human error, and for that we should be happy', but really if I took a good look at the shelf life of that sentiment, I would know it has already expired.

We arrive within the depths of Town Hall Station, intricately layered within century-old corridors lit with gold glass lanterns the shape of pineapples, sliding scissor gates on elevators a hundred metres beneath ground level, beneath the Queen Victoria Building that contains its own knotty layers of spiral stairs that mostly lead to nowhere but sometimes lead to old clocks and bells, and at Christmas a view from all angles of an immense tree that ascends from above the station concourse through to a star suspended from the glass dome at the building's apogee

four stories above. Christmas is mostly when we come here, a couple of days each year or two in the city over the Summer, a tradition we commenced when my daughter was five - perhaps a swim at the city pool, a walk through



The Rocks, and a visit here to the Queen Victoria Building, especially a little toy shop on the top floor that displays beautiful heritage dolls and carriages in its windows. My daughter would walk past these, though, and head straight for the fantastical beasts that occupied a medieval castle near the cash register, where she would sit and play and pick out a Cerberus or an armoured dragon to take on the train ride home. And, one year, we covertly took the castle home, too, ready to be opened on Christmas day.

Out on the street, we spot a busker dressed in yellow pyjamas with a green leaf atop his head, the costume of a video game character my daughter enjoys, a half-flower half-animal creation called a Pikmin. He's playing a rapid breakbeat on empty pasta sauce buckets, and he spins his drumsticks and shows his teeth in a massive smile whenever someone drops some coins on his mat and takes his photo. This is already a thrilling trip into the city - where else would you spot a happy Pikmin playing drums on the street. I point to glass windows two stories above his head, our bookstore destination.

The store resides in what is called The Galleries, a further collection of winding corridors (a persistent theme of this trip, corridors that lead to more corridors, until you're not sure if you've crossed beneath or above a street in the meantime, walking in one entrance and suddenly finding yourself on another side of the city) that used to house the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts, the oldest

continuous lending library in Australia. I used to see various Mechanics Institutes on trips across the state, often housed in beautiful sandstone buildings kept in a heritage state, such as the one a suburb over from our home, the Lambton Mechanics Institute, and wondered for years what they had to do with mechanics before I learned they were established as sites of adult learning, providing an opportunity for literacy and access to newspapers and journals, and lending libraries like the one established here in The Galleries.

Within the bookstore we each go our separate ways for a time. My daughter heads to the manga section in search of Sailor Moon, and I head to the poetry and literature sections in search of anything that catches my eye from the catalogue of authors I'm carrying in my head. Recently I've been interested in the idea of The South, a conceptual community of authors that could theoretically run from South America through South Africa to Australia, the idea being that those countries share a global parallel, pretty much running along the Tropic of Capricorn, whereby a range of similarities across climate, culture, indigenous experience and other aspects have lead to, in some cases, complementary collective dreams. But then, what thread runs through Lispector, Coetzee and Murnane that could form a family language, and is it even noteworthy to consider, given the range of influences that run backwards and forwards through time, across all cultures, through these authors. Anyway, what I

actually end up finding is a beautiful hardcover from The North, a transcription of a Bernhard monologue he delivered for a film documentary called Three Days, which reminds me, from the opening paragraphs, of the fleeting biographical fragments that I enjoy so much from Beckett's story Company. I find my daughter with her arms full of books which we take to the front counter and then out to the street.

It's only early and we still have a couple more hours up our sleeve, so we decide to get some lunch and plan our next move, find another bookstore perhaps that might contain a few titles we couldn't find here. Neither of us feels like a big lunch, so we get a sausage roll and a bottle of water each from the window of an eatery just outside The Galleries. Looking for a place to sit and eat and read through our books, I remember the Hilton Hotel's foyer, just a couple of metres away. When the company Apple, for whom I used to consult for, had their offices across two floors of the Hilton building, I would meet with employees on the lounges in the foyer for a chat, or else I would prepare myself before I went to the elevators and headed up to the thirteenth floor. This is where I take my daughter, to one of the tables in the foyer, where everything is immaculate. Light cascades in from twenty-metre-high glass windows, and we unfold our books on the table and read and plot our next move.

There is something about the potential for success that I found here in this building that I want my daughter

to pick up on, to get a sense that this is a pathway, that you can walk into a luxury building like this and, using your mind and good favour, add value to a space where someone will celebrate you through words and money. At thirteen, my daughter is a carbon copy of how I was at the same age - shy, uncertain, stubborn when she needs to be, and wondering how much of herself will join the world of people and how much will retreat. Lately, she has been talking about moving into the countryside to live in a cottage by herself, with a little plot of land for growing food, next to a forest perhaps, part of a gentle community where she can purchase wares from the market on a Sunday morning before wandering back home. But then she'll pivot; perhaps she'd rather live in a city high-rise with a rooftop for midnight parties, with fairy-lights strung between the pool area and the cabana, overlooking a harbour, soft dub music padding the floor. Both options are testing her sense of her own future capacities, while still so young, and whether she'll be able to afford to travel in a sleek elevator down to a supermarket with premium strawberries or whether she'll be like our bricklayer whom I recalled towards the outset here, telling me how he survived for years on potatoes from his dusty little garden. None of that sentiment is meant to cast any aspersions on class or economy or labor, but these are the considerations that take us out of childhood as we face the mirror of a morning and look for what is within us that can handle what is coming.

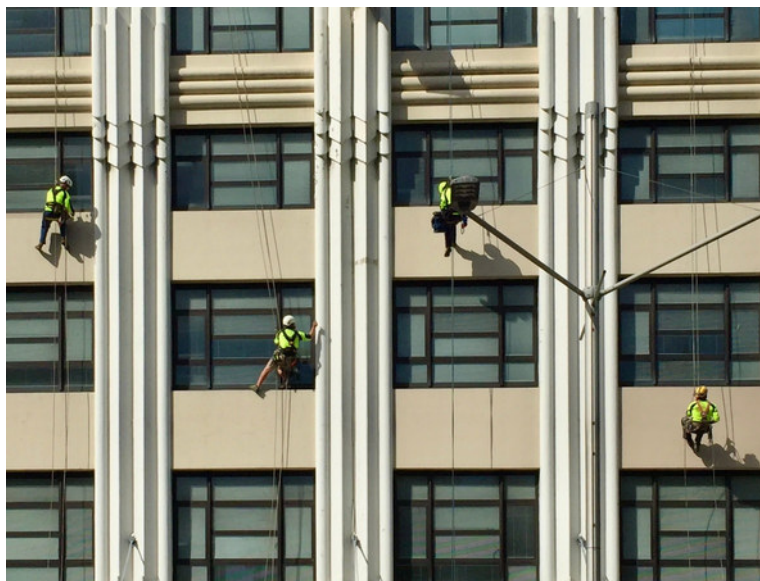
I look up other bookstores, particularly manga-focused ones, and find what looks like a good option some thirty-minute walk from here, but with the number of rideshare services around we book a car coming towards us in little time. While we wait outside I see a plaque attached to the top of a broad black cylindrical marble pole. It comes up to my waist, something I've never seen in all the times I've walked by here. It reads, 'To the memory of', and lists the names of those who, I learn, were killed here at the site of Australia's first domestic terrorist attack when a bomb in a rubbish bin exploded as it was emptied into a garbage truck. It killed two garbage collectors and one police officer, targeting, it is now assumed, a member of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Regional Meeting that was being held inside the Hilton. It is a subtle marker, like so many plaques and monuments positioned just outside pedestrian consciousness, that speak to grave, often enormous, historical moments that, for those not aware or affected, like my daughter and I here now, briefly conjure grand ghostly visions of events that barely seem possible to have occurred on this very spot.

In the same way that I referenced human memory earlier as a layering of transparent plates of glass across one another, with one memory casting its colours against the memory beneath and above to create new memories - composite remembrances that become all that we know - I think similar about not just these sites of historical event

but any given patch of land. You think of how many people have walked up and down this spot or on the street outside your home, the toddlers who became school children who became parents who became grandparents walking down to the bowling club, dressed in their Sunday best, and you think of the all the democracy of objects and vehicles over time, the cars and bikes and perhaps bullocks and horse carriages too, and what it might look like to layer all of these on top of one another, to compress all history into a single present moment, all those phantom objects and lives projected onto the street, mingling together in a vast haze of multiplicity, of everything all at once. Sometimes photographers will take long exposure shots of a busy street where, because the camera shutter is given a long delay between closing and opening, the movement of the pedestrians and cars will blur together in such a time-stretched way that they physically dissipate, producing a visual illusion of an empty street. What I see in my mind, through a spontaneous revealing of all historical action on a single site, of seeing everything that has ever occurred there all at once, is an inversion of this long exposure, rather a double exposure, or more accurately, a trillion-fold exposure of maximalist proportions, that instead of producing an image of an empty street would, perhaps, create an image so packed full of visual information that the street itself would be emptied out of physical form, like a coastal shelf eroded by waves, revealing a tunnel burrowed within cluttered

black space, where a pinhole of light, a gap of a mere pixel width, allows just enough space for a future to arrive.

Brushing sausage roll crumbs from our faces before the car arrives, I point up at the side of the building across the street to where window cleaners are working together, synchronised, as they descend the sheer front of glass and stone. They look like musical notes on a stave, semibreves probably, with stone column bar lines dividing the notation. My daughter immediately looks away, it makes her too dizzy to look up at them, but I keep staring, fascinated with their alignment. They bring to mind a philosophical article I read some months ago on spacetime



called Sideways Music. The idea is that most agreed-upon considerations of time are not reliant on the world being oriented in any particular way – you can be upside-down, the world can be flipped, inverted however you'd like, and time will still travel the same old way it always does. But the article's author says, what about music and how it travels through time, from one point to another, with all the notes lined up horizontally on a musical stave being played one after another. If you were to rotate that music ninety degrees, you would not get the same music, but instead, you would hear all the notes played at once. A ninety-minute symphony would take place in the length of a single note, with all other notes used across the scale of the composition pressed together into the duration of that single one, a brief chord containing everything. The argument, in part, is that because of this extreme distortion to the performance and the mangled aesthetics that would result, we should consider the impact of geometric space orientation on our conception of time flow.

A moral question arises here, too, on the impact of reorienting, say, the development of ideas over time. Consider how our understanding of how children acquire language has evolved across the centuries, from early ideas about the impact of adults talking around a baby to the architecture of linguistic devices we can now give a name to. We presume that our understanding has gotten better over time, more accurate to the reality of human experience, but what would the moral basis for that

consideration be if the development of ideas were turned sideways so that, rather than *this idea* leading to the evolution of the *next idea*, and so on, that trajectory of understanding was compressed into a single moment, where the starting point, of *misunderstanding*, and the endpoint, of *understanding more*, and everything between, were the very same. And what would it do to parental gaze, looking at a child, at my son and my daughter, not as seeds coming into bloom hour by day, year by decade, but a lifetime in an instance. You see attempts at this on the internet, where people photograph themselves daily and turn them into a rapid video timelapse, where thirty years of life are observed in mere seconds. Nobody seems to have quite worked out yet how to meaningfully render eighty years of human life, let alone a multitude of human lives, into the duration of a hand clap, which, considering the cacophonous nihilism of a symphony turned vertical, is to our favour.

Our car arrives and we put our masks on and get in. We are driven to Haymarket, where we are dropped off in front of a plain five-storey office building. It is a box of alternating strips of glass and concrete, all roughly the same dimensions, from the ground to its flat roof. This is another one of these anonymous modern spaces that I am forever drawn to, because for all their impersonal utility they cannot help but give off a smell, an intimacy of some gradual economic failure that, for all I know, may or may not be real, and it endears them

to me in a dozen tender ways. Like arcades in the throes of decline, car parks on the side of town that nobody travels to anymore, shopping centres waiting for the final business to move out so they can either be demolished or let sit there as an empty shell for land banking, these places resonate with a part of me that feels a responsibility to failure, a decorum of recognising the inevitability, the grace, of failing, and finding peace within.

Inside this particular building with its 1980s peach paintwork, faux marble balustrades, chunky metal railings, escalators and mirror walls, is, so far as my daughter and I walk past, a hairdresser (closed), a passport photograph store (closed), a children's tutoring service (closed), an optometrist (open), an education administration office (open), a noodle restaurant (closed), a dumpling restaurant (closed), a bakery (open), what looks like a technical college of some sort (closed), a travel agency (closed), and the bookstore (open) we came here for.

The bookstore has a limit of allowing four people at a time inside, such are the small dimensions of the place and testament to how packed full of books it is. We only wait a couple of minutes before two teenagers leave and we are let through by a polite employee who points us to the wall of manga they think we'll be most interested in. They are correct, and while this place is a hundred times smaller than the bookshop

we went to in The Galleries, it contains everything my daughter has hoped to find. It reminds me of what the internet promised when we all started getting dial-up modems, the potential to find a place, a community, for your esoteric, quirky interests in a way that television and supermarkets could never provide. My daughter excitedly loads her arms full of books, and we become members of the store (for a discount on this sale and the opportunity for future offers, all for the price of an e-mail address added to a marketing distribution list). We are both full of buzz as we leave the store, thrilled to have found this gem of a store by taking a chance on a trip across town, and so we decide to not call another car just yet but rather walk around the area a little more, perhaps get a drink and have a sit down somewhere.

We wander down a quiet access road between buildings that looks like it leads somewhat towards the harbour. To our amazement, we walk out onto a spontaneous cornucopia of colour and delight, a food hub structured around a broad courtyard with tiered bench seating all around, partially covered by wood slat gazebos which, on this occasion, have dozens of green, red, pink, yellow and pale blue flags hanging from them, all depicting different characters from the Hello Kitty universe. There are around a hundred people in the vicinity, mostly pairs and bigger groups of people talking and eating together. It is such a beautiful sunny day, and the feeling of walking out onto this scene of

festive, happy community is just wonderful, decorated with all this abundant joviality. A Hello Kitty modern art exhibition is on by the looks of things, annotated not only by the flags but also tall psychedelic prints of Japanese punk artworks that incorporate the Hello Kitty character, such as skateboard graffiti Hello Kitty, robot mecha Hello Kitty, a superflat flowerface Hello Kitty that looks like a Takashi Murakami original, and, in the centre of it all, a five-metre tall inflatable Hello Kitty face embedded in a cloudscape with a bouncy rainbow behind.

I take a photo of my daughter posed in front of the giant inflatable, she's keen to send it to her friends who share her enthusiasm for all things infused with Japanese pop culture, and I can see how magical she's finding all of this - the little bookstore that contained



such abundance, walking out onto this maximalist carnival of wonder, all sunshine and populated and not done yet, because we can see they are selling Hello Kitty themed food down by one of the quieter eateries, little ice creams with edible character image candies on top. We sit with our dessert and look out onto, what else, a pop-up ice skating rink set up beside the harbour, a half dozen kids in colourful skates gliding around an artificial frozen lake with a sun-kissed ocean just behind them. What a scene. A long way from falling asleep with my dog on top of an abandoned gasworks solo.

Looking around, I notice that I've been to this area once. A couple of years ago, when I was involved in a start-up business project, I gave a talk at an investor event in a conference centre just down the boardwalk. I tell my daughter about it, and she remembers my involvement. After attending a disability-focused technology hackathon on a whim (I think the invitation came to a colleague and I by accident), my team (we were the only team thrown together haphazardly because we didn't pre-plan our involvement, a ramshackle collective that included a Russian artist, an Iranian hacker, a Vietnamese ethics philosopher, and my colleague and I, two rogue school teachers who'd been finding emerging opportunities outside of the classroom) somehow won the event, first prize of some twenty-five thousand dollars to invest in the creation of a wearable tech device. The idea for the device was that

it was, essentially, a mood ring with machine learning built-in; a wristband that could detect anxiety-related emotions through sensors (we also looked into socks and singlets because they pressed against parts of the skin where subtle electrical changes could triangulate interoceptive data) and then send that information to the phone of the user, or the phone of a trusted adult in the case of a child, to provide an early warning system for an anxiety-related behavioural response, to give enough time for the individual to be supported so they could get themselves out of a stressful situation and start self-regulating. It was a fascinating concept, but it didn't make it beyond that point.

The thing that I tell my daughter, though, the part about the whole experience that stays with me, is how much fun it was after the investor event in the conference centre that I'm pointing to behind the skating rink. I had to give a presentation about our device to a room full of people that night, and as of the afternoon, I was barely prepared. With only the vaguest idea of what I would talk about, I finished up my school day and boarded a nearby train en route to Haymarket via Central Station, sketching some talking points on a pad and reciting a few key lines in my head. By the time I arrived in Sydney and ran, just in time, into the event, I was a pulsating ball of nerves and energy, unsure about anything that would come out of my mouth. I found my team, we embraced, and when my name was

called to represent us on stage, I walked up and took the microphone from its stand and said everything I wanted to say with flourishes of humour, with genuine emotion, telling stories about children I worked with, wrapping it all up in relevant research, and walking down afterwards into the crowd knowing, all modesty aside, that I'd knocked it out of the ballpark.

That trip down narcissism lane is not the part I tell my daughter. The part I tell my daughter focuses on after the speech, when my team and I met some investors and one of them recommended we change the name of our potential company. We agreed it would be a good idea, so after a few complimentary drinks, we bounced outside to the boardwalk by the harbour and walked to Central Station to catch our rides home, talking all the while about possible names for our venture. This is the part of the narrative I try to capture for my daughter, to tell her how exciting it was to glide across the city with this ragtag collective who I'd only known for a month but was already enamoured by, the way everybody was so clever and creative with their ideas, and this one scene, the moment that stands out above all else, where we all pushed onto a train together, standing room only, seeing our artist grab a little pad to record the jumble of words we were spilling out (emotions, feelings, a prompt for those things, a research term), the hacker and the philosopher go back and forth with iterations (if IQ is for cognitive

intelligence and EQ is for the emotional side, and if we are wanting a way of describing how emotional signs can be recorded, alerted, prompted, in some way), my colleague and I looking around at the sea of faces on the train and just smiling, what have we gotten ourselves into, and then it comes to us all at once, collectively – *eCue*, as in ‘e’ for emotion and ‘cue’ as a way of describing a prompt, and it sounds like EQ. Brilliant. We knew it was a bit cheesy and smacked of superficial corporate gloss, but we’d created it together, here on this train, pressed against a thousand other bodies, twenty minutes out from the conference centre, four hours out from when I left my school and jumped on a train. This was the adult equivalent of walking into a sunny food court graced with a five-metre-tall inflatable Hello Kitty face.

Like in the foyer of the Hilton Hotel, this is the feeling of potential I want to convey to my daughter, to provide a model for what is possible *out there* in the world. You don’t necessarily need to be down here in the middle of the Sydney metropolis to know the feeling, but for the same reason that folks the world over disembark on capital cities for creative opportunities, it doesn’t hurt to recognise how a geographical condition predicated on millions of lives pushed together economically is going to result in, at the very least, a spectrum of bustling variance that you don’t find in small towns. And sometimes you just need

a holiday down here to get a sense of it again, to dip your toe in the sprawl and, then, retreat to your nest amongst the quieter aspects, the calmer days, to recall the energy and the heat that bustling communities provide. That's certainly how I seem to live. It would be too much for me down here all the time, and I've never really believed in the idea of a middle ground between light and shadow – things are either on or off. To misquote Nietzsche, you either have chaos in your soul whilst you give birth to a dancing star, or you're a soap bubble trailing the gentle slipstream of a butterfly. You're either pressed against a thousand others on an evening train or walking with your son beside a string of empty coal train wagons, looking up at the midday sun.

The pandemic is not what brought my period of Hilton Hotel foyers and hackathon ventures to a close. It may have been more closely aligned with the pending



birth of my son, but even before then I could feel my Icarus wings melting. There is something phantastical at play when you're part of a network of busy, success-hungry others. A lot of smoke and mirrors give rise to possibilities, but you need to constantly monitor your ascension towards the sun and, if you're unable to lower your altitude, at least ensure you're over water. The moment this crystallised for me was on a work trip in Singapore while I was sitting at Raffles bar one afternoon. I had snuck away from the conference I was attending to wander the streets of Singapore, and by chance, I found myself in the foyer (another luxury hotel foyer, what is the symbolism here) of the historic Raffles Hotel. When I say by chance, I actually mean this. A walk down one narrow street led to an adjacent street with colourful window boxes on the side of weatherboard apartments. Without a noticeable transition, I was now walking on grass through a garden of abundant ferns that led to a sheltered corridor (good fortune, as it had just started raining), a foyer, and then up some stairs to an open rooftop bar with a bathtub, rapidly filling with rainwater, in the middle of the area, then down some more stairs into an outdoor bar area. The rain had stopped, so I dried a seat with my shirt and sat down. I took out a pad and started writing an impressionistic poem describing some of what I'd just seen and been thinking about, as well as a vision of perhaps what was changing or being realised within me. This is the first part of the poem:

So what the raindrops are halogen
or magnesium in glowlight and The
Fighter, of course, only one without
an umbrella, and yet what matter
the straw hat the white linen shirt
drenched one minute now steaming
not quite dry but surely near enough
to snap the barbs Time's Arrow's head.

Past The Cathay the cinematic air still
filled with sundrop cylinders fizzling
as they hit feetfallen avenue that The
Fighter, bless him, past his prime, soft
gutted shoulders hunched yes but broad
enough to still do what sky imbues him
with - an ever present warning signal
posture ready to return the rocket flare.

Past The Cathay on Fat Boy's Burgers
say burger red the colour of fascination
of course, of course, could throw these
wet clothes into the bin at shops, The
Fighter buy a new shirt robot cat future
proof of the sudden downpour for later
regaling to who - one who peels brown
autumn shells from flowers, puts in ears.

The rain on the tiles near the outdoor
bar in Raffles make the tiles look wet,
like really wet, like each tile were a
brown expressionist painting of great
wetness with acrylic emulsion polymers
nowhere near dry and say who knows
how The Fighter got here from the street,
from bend of bay through horticultured

archway, possibly, who can say, except
perhaps the one he spots sitting there
in the rain - my old friend, of all places,
the synchronicity of it - The Failure.
Absorbed in the televisual news, he is
leaning on the wet bar with raindrops
mingling in nestled sea of bourbon. Lad,
it is not that I cannot process it all, say

he turns to The Fighter, but rather it
is not enough no am not after censor
nor longform perspectivism or peace
but something I can okay listen to this
Howe & Nissenbaum two oh oh nine
regarding obfuscation even just the
word fills me with hold on my lips are
dry like tiles that never knew the rain.

A mind that can absorb so much and yet use so little, The Fighter met The Failure in his neatly cubed backyard in Wee Waa, this is going back say a decade plus, say doubleback and sponsor the pastwise, say The Fighter as story being told by The Failure, every narrative a diary of youth being told to the ever-youth in our head.

I went a'walking the other day and heard a new voice behind my eyes, perhaps the third evolution of tenor and gradient, of bend and volley, that my headwords have resounded since preverbal longing hold up The Failure smacks the bar thus teaching glisten to pike, to pirouette, oh you think so much and wander so little

my fighter now punch your way towards train station, Adlestrop, no I mean the paddle pop at the mass rapid transit stand, we should blockchain to Shenzhen for biohack components, I foresee a subskin flat breadboard to prototype a filter that pollutes all incoming news of the world, yes lad, views o' the pearled nihillistening.



The idea of *The Fighter* and *The Failure* came to me as a way of talking about two conceptual parts of myself. I see them conversing, but in another way, they are the same person, analogies of each other, as always, as two become one. *The Fighter* is, by all accounts, an autobiographical story of youth, a story that *The Failure*, an older man approaching the end of his days, tells himself whilst sitting in some quiet, imaginary backyard. This is who I am - a man, older than myself, who looks back at what he has worked on in his life to see only a crumble of dust and silence, and this provides modesty and a great sense of peace because it is a good thing to look back at one's accomplishments and see how time renders them indistinguishable from their opposite. It creates a sense of grace. And, I am also a young man who, though still with

time to come, is '*past his prime, soft gutted shoulders hunched yes but broad enough to still do what sky imbues him with*'; in other words, he may have professionally peaked and is no longer in the form he was, but he is still a contender, he can still strap his hands and pack a punch when he needs to. I must have read a blurb on the back of a Samuel Beckett play, likely *Endgame*, describing the play, or perhaps Beckett's oeuvre in general, as like a heavyweight twitching on the mat. That seems a very good image to me, the boxer on the mat beneath the lights, reeling from a knockdown, but you know from his electric, horizontal jerks that he's got fight left in him. He's going to get back up and prepare for round two, or three, or whatever, and he'll probably be laughing all the while. I had our local, historic boxing legend, Les Darcy, in my mind, too, feeding into this image. From the beginning of the second part of the poem:

It is possible he should have allowed
the blood poisoning from his tooth
to swallow him after the knock taken
in the beachside ring back six months
that afternoon when the sandscape
melted in waves of grainy lava phasing
see Les Darcy at Balmoral, see how
Red and Gold Sunset by Whistler was

a mirror unto the slides of diagnostic
hemoglobin observed in the seaside
maternity hospital, see the young cad
in Woolworths sizing up The Fighter
and being egged on by mates and and
wham he receives The Fighter in his
toffee toned raincoat with enough full
physical force to turn the contenders

muscle tendons into yeast, crushed ye
entropically into the bakery shelves,
thy mass now the bread of the universe
that The Failure would later say must
be broken off and shared unto itself like
trees too far gone with sending signals
of biological risk to one another so now
all dialogue is via transplanted limbs.

My daughter sleeps on the train journey home.
When we arrive at Broadmeadow station, the rays from
the sunset salting through the windows wake her up. We
collect our books together and alight. Standing on the
platform and looking back at the train, shadowed against
the skyline, it appears like a thin metal pencil box, with
windows of old brown glass, sourced perhaps from a
medicinal bottle dug up beneath stubborn roots in the

garden. Going on this trip to Sydney, experiencing populated spaces again for the first time in recent years and thinking about the enterprising days of my former work life, I'm inspired to get involved with people again. On the walk home we pick up dinner on the way and walk past a community garden where I used to take my daughter when she was younger, and where I presently take my son. It's been through various states of care and abandonment across the decade, but recently I noticed it's been taken over by a new group of eager contributors. A chalk-penned sign on the garden advertises a community breakfast for tomorrow morning, six thirty, for anybody who'd like to learn more about the space and get involved. This sounds like just what I'm after. When I ask my daughter if she'd like to come too, she says she'll think about it.

I turn back to watch our train go into a tunnel. The sound it makes as it passes through, an alto stretch of wind pulled through stone piping, is like a low trumpet volley announcing the arrival of something, perhaps something coming up from underground. As the train leaves the tunnel, it playfully spills its carriages out into a tumble of daisy-pressed fields, rolling on its back and panting in the cool.

III

The community garden sits between a Croatian sports club, a children's playground and a sports oval. It's a terrific spot – the garden itself contains a half dozen silkie chickens, a spectrum of herbs, fruits and vegetables (borage, gooseberry, Mexican tarragon, banana, guava passionfruit, mango, Vietnamese mint, pennyroyal, garlic chive, camomile, lettuce, potato, zucchini), car tyres planted vertically in the ground at different heights for children to balance on, little bridges over rock creeks, a wooden cubbyhouse, assorted water tanks, benches beneath foliage – and it benefits from its position next to the sports club, which provides an outdoor barbeque and pizza oven in shared yard space. We've been coming here for at least the past ten years; I remember bringing my daughter when she was just starting to walk, more fun than the playground next door, she'd walk out onto the bocce court that bumps up against the pizza oven and roll balls across the ground. Now my son goes into the same spot, although he prefers to climb the fences and flip the scorecards over.

It's a good spot for walking my dog around here, not too close to the silkie chickens, of course, but just behind the garden on the sports oval. A gravel track runs the perimeter of the oval, shaded on one side by a row of Moreton Bay figs, and nestled on the other by a historic grandstand, a beautiful structure of some thirty rows of seating that, together, we climb to look out across the area. You can see the marina and fisherman's co-operative from

up here, as well as the beginning of Industrial Drive that heads out of Newcastle and up into the rural northern regions and east out to Stockton and Port Stephens, where the coal loaders and airport reside. A plane is overhead currently, heading for a six o'clock touchdown. I picture the airport, only a little terminal, with its little lights being switched on, toy trolleys waiting to collect the colourful pill-shaped bags that fall out the side of the plane, people shuffling about, legs and arms manipulated to provide the impression of movement. Why is this what I picture, a Lego version of the airport - I guess I'm used to seeing it from above. I'm reminded of a little poem I wrote on a return flight into Newcastle that felt like I was coming in late at night but was actually early morning:

There is eighty to ninety percent flat
black expanse between the pin prick
glisten of the white and gold dot city
behind the beach with an ember rim,
why does it shine so, no necklace of
lights or fire stake phosphorescence
along the coastline, only lapping void
and then I get it, the wing of the plane,
its edge has caught some light of day
inverted, a morning turning in reverse,
not sand but aero alloy - waving hello.

Heading out of Newcastle on a northbound flight you can see, within the sand dunes that necklace the coast here, an area referred to as Tin City, a collection of eleven shacks half buried in the sand, made of corrugated iron, tea tree and solar panels, started by a handful of locals who needed a roof above their heads during the Depression, and still occupied and lived in today, but not owned, they are not allowed to be owned or sold in the traditional sense, only passed on to family or friends by direction of hazy local by-laws. I met a couple who lived in one of the Tin City shacks. They were sleeping rough beside the Croatian sports club here, outside beneath the covered patio. They cuddled my dog like he was a big teddy bear, which he sort of is, and told me that the Winter winds had all but covered their place in sand - they could no longer even get in through a window, so they were resting here for a couple of nights before jumping on a train to head inland where they had another shack, a mirror copy of the one in Tin City, located in a mining village amongst the red sands out west. Their annual routine was to live in their mining desert shack during the Winter when their home in Tin City was inhabitable, then leave the desert and head back to the beach when Spring and Summer came. They'd spend a couple days with neighbours digging their place out of the sand, and then they'd live out the warm months here, swimming of a morning, fishing for lunch and dinner, and sleeping on the beach when it got too hot inside. I asked which shack

came first, which was the original that they then copied and reproduced in the other sandscape, but they couldn't remember.

By a quarter past six, most of the community garden organisers have arrived and begun setting up the barbeque for breakfast. I introduce myself and offer to help, but they say they have it covered, which is not bad as I'm not great with cooking. To be honest, I'm not great with gardening either, which only occurs to me as I look around at the tools and the garden beds and wonder whether I'll be more of a hindrance than a helper. I look around the lock-up shed, which has a broken lock and latch, poke around the assorted gardening resources, and find a box full of wooden chess pieces and a foosball table pushed up against the back wall. Outside, behind the shed, is a planter box growing shoots of bamboo, a worm farm adorned with a large cutout wooden worm wearing a hat, and behind that is a hill of overgrown shrubs and ferns. I'd be happy to get in there and tidy things up; it doesn't look like it will require any subtle gardening knowledge. The fence that sections off this part of the garden is falling down, and an old paper printed and laminated sign that once read *Please Keep Off The Gardens* must have used red ink for the words *Keep Off*, which have since faded away in the sunlight, leaving what should possibly be a gentle motto of the community project here.

I'm passed a bacon and egg roll and start to mingle with the dozen others here. Most are a good twenty years



older than me, and for the most part they all seem to know each other already. Some have been involved in other community garden projects across the city, one near the cathedral on the hill, another over the bridge near the port. Community gardens have been springing up everywhere during the past decade. I always enjoy visiting them with my kids, but I don't use them in the functional way they're intended by picking herbs and vegetables and using them in meals. My daughter will always pick a strawberry when she sees one, but I've never been knowledgeable enough about using food grown from the earth in meals because I know very little about cooking. I know how to make a toasted sandwich, and I know how to grill a steak, but that's about it. Perhaps that's something I'll pick up from

here - I see on the noticeboard they host cooking events. Learn to garden, learn to cook; but I wonder what I'll bring to this space.

The organisers ask if anybody has any questions about the garden. I want to ask something I noticed on the walk here – it rained heavily during the night, everywhere was pummelled after hours of water bucketed down across the neighbourhood, and yet when I looked closely at a flowerbed of little pansies they were all so spritely, their faces poked unperturbed skyward on their thin little green necks. They weren't bent, they weren't squashed face down in the mud by the force of the rain. How is that possible, that's what I want to ask, and I want an answer that talks about the composition of the funnelling of the stem, how they only break if you double them over and then squeeze and twist. I want to know about the rubbery layers within the green tubing of their necks, but I don't ask because I feel like the question might be misinterpreted as one about human resilience. Plus, it's a silly question – they want to know if anybody has any questions about the scope of work here, the funding model for the community garden, who decides what is planted, and the maintenance schedule. I look around and see if anybody else has any questions, which they do, about the scope of work here, about the funding model, and so on.

Conversations break into smaller groups now. Those next to me talk about the garden they've contributed to up on The Hill, near the cathedral. Someone

takes up the thread on the cathedral, about when they were a schoolboy and walked to the cathedral with their class on an excursion. They wandered the cemetery in the gardens out the back of the building, overlooking the harbour and the city. A curious focus for a school excursion, they assume it was for a history lesson but can't quite recall. They went on how they were looking at the gravestones and noticed a half dozen who all died on the same day. Asking their teacher, assuming the cause must have been war-related, the teacher surprised them by saying they had died in a shipwreck off shore, that there used to be many shipwrecks when travel by water was the only way to travel to and from Australia. The teacher estimated that there had been around two hundred wrecks of boats trying to navigate the corridor into Newcastle harbour, and he pointed towards Stockton, where the iron hulls of some of the ships still remain lodged in the shallow seabed.

I mention that I used to play the pipe organ at the cathedral when I was a teenager. During high school, I was a student at the music conservatorium, next to Civic Park, near the fountain and the sculpture of decimated stone that my son and I visit. A window in the organ room on the third floor of the conservatorium looks out onto the park. I used to sit and watch little birds dance in the sunlit trees when taking a break from playing scales. This talk of music piques interest as one of the organisers leans over and talks about their love of the music of Bach, followed

by a chorus of agreement from others. It seems that everybody here loves Bach. I agree and say how much I enjoy looking at the sheet music of Bach's works to follow the geometry of his counterpoint, and how Bach used to compose music for the shape of the church he was writing for. This draws intrigue, what do you mean, and I explain what I read somewhere about the structure of some of Bach's later compositions, how he would align the structure of the piece to the architectural structure of the church.

Consider walking down a church aisle from the front door to the altar. You might have a little foyer area at the beginning, followed by a widening out beyond this, and then perhaps there is a vestry off to the side before the aisle continues down, and then you get to the crossing area before the altar, where the building spans out left and right into the north and south transept. This is how Bach would structure his composition – the foyer would introduce a minor melodic theme, and then the widening out would introduce broad harmonic chords to expand the range of notes. When the vestry area comes along, there would be an opportunity for a new melodic flourish, a variation before returning to the theme, straight on now up the aisle before two bass counterpoint sequences would enter, the north and south transept, transposing the key in two different directions before resolving in the altar area.

The counterpoint is the most fascinating part of this, I go on. There are times when you can hear Bach

pushing into atonality, very unusual for his period, experimenting with noise music, opening up the reeds on the organ to create a wall of sound at one end of the spectrum, and then a sonic inversion of that wall at the other, a slight melody that we nearly mistake for silence, only that it carves its initials into the atonal noise wall constructed opposite and hollows out a little of the density to reveal a gap - that's the critical part, a momentary pause between melody and noise. That was Bach's great innovation, the most significant musical innovation, to my mind, since rhythm was invented to mimic the beating of our mother's heart, and melody conjured to imitate the sound of our mother calling our name. Sure, Beethoven later added a choir to an orchestra, but does this push



against the stratosphere in the way Bach accomplished a century earlier. The illusory pause on the knife edge of counterpoint, the promise of the resolution of the gap - it's essentially the sonic representation of the birth of meaning, of human subjectivity, teetering between signal and noise, silence and nihilism. That's what Bach constructed when he made music in the shape of churches.

Now I've done it. I'm talking too much and being asked to say more. Because I know nothing about gardening or using herbs in cooking recipes, I've commandeered the conversation into my own ground, a tumble of disjecta that roll around my head as I walk around town but are never meant to be said aloud. Someone asks what I mean about human subjectivity, and it's too late to retreat into polite conversation. I take a piece of chalk from a bucket and start annotating on a wooden fence next to the worm farm.

Well, I say, I think that subjectivity, what we might call consciousness, comes into being when matter communicates with itself about itself, in a reflexive manner. Like hands drawing themselves, like the signals that trees send to other trees to communicate biological risk, but consider a tree not talking to other trees but rather talking to itself about itself, sending messages to itself, about itself, in an analogous manner, against a mirror.

The use of the term *analogous* here is not casual. This is the very same birth process that the formation of analogy experiences. Consciousness, subjectivity, is an

analogy of itself - it comes to life as an analogy by how it relates to, and about, itself. Our subjectivity is a split between two states: the '*I think*', and the '*thing that thinks*'; or, you might describe it in other ways - the flat language you give to your thoughts, and the symbolic thought tools that are fuelled by shadowed, unknowable intentions that help approach comprehension. This *split* is the subject itself, is our subjectivity. Within the split there is, as long as we live, an always manifesting, antagonistic potential that inhabits a position of incompleteness. This incompleteness is not epistemological, of not knowing enough about one own limitation of possible perceptions, but is an *ontological incompleteness*, rising out of a negative space, out of this split, that we might consider as *less than nothing*.

So, let's call this negative state of potentiality minus one (-1), this state of less than nothing in which our subjectivity resides, positioned not only at, but as the intersection, between zero (0), what we might call the democracy of objects around us, and plus one (1), the projected state of our idealised conceptions of these objects, that which we see around us in a positive state of being. Our subjectivity here should again be reemphasised not as *something* or *nothing* but as *less than nothing*, as a sublimation, a gap, a split that is always ontologically incomplete and in analogous dialogue with itself, in much the same way that matter talked to itself, about itself, to establish subjective consciousness in the beginning. Think

of a möbius strip, and it's halfway there.

It might be tempting to see this as another dualism, or even as another structural trilogy, like the 'father, son and holy ghost', or the three blind mice, or the third eye, or whatever - but rather, it is more accurate to see it as *two that is also one*, as a dialectic that is not seeking a resolution of, say, *two becomes one*, but rather as an antagonism that supports this structure through conflict, through dialogue, in a manner that can only exist within the antagonism between two dualities. Think of midday, the moment when one becomes two: it is a gap that is made manifest because of the two periods of time on either side through which it intersects. Well - that gap is you.

You catch yourself, during times like these, when you realise you've been talking too much, in a twin state of shame that faces out and faces in. Shame because you



realise you've let your mouth run away with itself, spouting ideas that should be relegated to the pages of obscure written tracts of autofiction. The surrounding faces are either too polite or perhaps too worried for you to turn away. But shame too because why should you feel poorly towards yourself for talking about what you're passionate about, when you give your time to listen to so much disastrously dull conversation, and really you haven't spoken like this to anybody for literal years, so give yourself a break. And maybe that's what this is, years of cloistered living, out of the city, wandering with your pre-verbal and then just-verbal son, seeking out the quiet quarters with triangles of sunlight cast against brutalist government buildings, storm water drains, vacant soccer fields. My social capacities have diminished.

A man in his sixties with a kind face and steel-wool hair leans towards me and asks what I do for a living. I tell him I used to be a classroom schoolteacher, but now I'm not sure, and he laughs and says that I talk like a teacher. Perhaps, he says, you'd like to give some lectures here some evenings. He says, we sometimes cook a pizza of an evening and invite speakers in, do you think you'd be interested in doing that. I say it's a lovely offer, but I honestly don't have much to say. What about music, he says, do you think you could give a performance here some evenings, or a nice morning breakfast Bach session, we could get an electric organ in. Or, do you write music perhaps.

I like that this chap has already clocked onto the fact that I will not be of any practical assistance here. He gestures to a new section of the garden, the main reason we're all gathered here. They've received a substantial injection of resources to create a dozen new garden beds - wooden sleepers, bags of fertiliser, twine, seeds, and a donation of tools from the local Men's Shed, beautiful vintage ones, dark wood-handled hoes and hammers. He says, would you consider writing a piece of music perhaps to commemorate the opening of the new wing of our garden here, we're planning on having a little ceremony here in around six weeks, and we'll be inviting all the volunteers who contribute to the garden, some of the local council members who organised funding, the school across the road are going to contribute artworks, and it would be wonderful if you would perhaps write and perform a piece for the event.

Yes, I say, I'd love to do this, and it's true, I really would enjoy writing something for the garden ceremony. Tinkering with music composition has been one of my amateur joys for many years. An idea for a piece immediately begins to form - what about an electro-acoustic composition that combines recorded sounds from the area here, a mapping of audio samples such as garden bird song, the rustling of leaves, the crumble of rock underfoot, even the gracing of salt from the boat sails on the harbour, jaunty air phasing from the coal carriages on the nearby rail, recording their shafts of choral resonance.

Then, layer these into an ambient soundscape that will provide a bed of tones for an organ piece to sit atop. I know someone nearby who runs a vinyl press; he can put these sounds onto a record which I can then spin on a portal turntable placed beside a portable organ, a harmonium perhaps, a little wind-powered keyboard that fits in a suitcase, for the performance. This excites me, and while I feel disappointed I haven't put myself in for a more practical task at the garden, perhaps this is still a way to contribute to the community here, rather than requiring others to tutor me in methods of tending plants, I can independently get on with this task and bring something back that might add value to the overall project.

I return home, collect my laptop, microphone and a stand, and then head back to the garden area to collect sound samples. Years ago, I used to contribute recorded sounds to an online database; it currently holds around half a million field recordings from across the world (or, played one after another, nearly a full year of continuous audio). While so much of internet media is image-based, and increasingly so (to the point where videos are watched with the sound turned off more than on, according to social media statistics), I find this community of sound archivists engrossing. You search for 'seaside' and get hits for five minutes of ambience on an island beach near Florida, of mallards on the coast of Chile, of big waves hitting Sweden from the Baltic Sea, a late summer afternoon on a private beach near a vineyard in Vietnam. A

search for 'train station' yields an electric train entering and leaving a quiet station in rural Japan, a passenger terminal in the Netherlands with hooligans chanting in the background, station announcements in Waterloo, a run of cargo wagons passing by a small town in the Wirikuta Desert. 'Abandoned' gets you fifteen minutes in a mine once used for the production of mercury, with notes that the main feature of the recording is that you can hear creaking as the sun hits the walls of the buildings and they begin to warm and expand. How can you go back to looking at photos and videos after being exposed to that.

At the back of the sports oval is a rail line that, down the track, connects to the rail beside the TAFE. It might not appear to contribute anything positive to the community garden experience, but I enjoy standing near a patch of pennyroyal and looking through the wire fence across the oval towards the line and listening to engine rattle reverberate against the walls of the tunnel, the station, and carry back over here in dissolving tones. Those are the contributing sensory revelations that feed into the psychogeography of any area you find yourself in - part of the background wash of sound interpolated with highway drift and latent cuckoo call - and it does well to sometimes isolate them and consider their solo merits, distinguished from the broader symphony of splinters more often bypassed.

I trek through long grass behind the oval towards the rail. There is a good spot with access right next to the

line just beyond a clearing at the back of a disused industrial grease manufacturer. Over a hill that divides the stretch I'm walking is a peculiar structure, a geodesic dome, set up in the clearing. From the community garden you can't see it, and I've been here in recent weeks and haven't seen it, so it must be new. What it is and why it is here is a complete mystery to me. I remember there used to be a large house somewhere here, there it is, mostly collapsed, with only a few rusted structural remnants present. A mate of mine used to call it Happyland. He described it as a deserted house where a rotating roster of local musicians would move in and squat for a period and perform in the yard, like an artist-in-residence venue for homeless jam bands. When I get to the dome, I see a couple of plastic chairs and a school desk within the structure's frame. Only a third of the dome is covered in sheeting; the rest is a series of exposed metal rods forming a tessellation of triangles that bend into the sky. I walk through to the other side, beside the remains of Happyland, and set up my laptop and microphone.

An eight-car passenger train passes into Newcastle. I capture its curved sound wave, shaped like a rocket laid sideways, pointing to the east: a gradual ascension of audio fusing city ambience with the first rattle of rail, an arc of rising amplitude until the train is beside the microphone, deploying a thick block of sound that peaks sharply at the end, a final percussive hit of metal and wind as the train leaves the scene, fading the wave back to its



baseline. With my audio software, I take the recording and stretch its time to double the length. It just sounds like a slow train at half speed, comically so, an effect that might be used in a Hanna-Barbera cartoon. Halve the speed again, and you get something more interesting, the sound of wind passing through a half dozen brass instruments left outside overnight on wet grass. But things get even more special when you halve the speed again, a fifteen-second recording now extended to a two-minute duration, as the fibres of sound pull away from each other and reveal a choir of voices sitting firmly in the bass register. The closest environmental tone that comes to mind is a whale call, or perhaps more precisely, the sound of a bag full of alarm clocks dragged to the bottom of an empty public pool just as they begin to ring, a ghostly resonance that reverberates from the bottom up. The question is,

what are the choir of voices emanating from this time-stretched train recording trying to say.

I try to halve the speed of the recording again, and the software hangs. The computer kicks its fan into high gear and sounds like it is chipping against something inside the case. Finally, the software crashes. When I open it up again, the sound recording is nowhere to be seen. It has been lost. The fan, though, hasn't stopped. If anything, it's getting noisier. I notice the laptop is rocking back and forth where I placed it on a flat pile of bricks near the fence. When I pick the computer up, I see the battery compartment is bulging, and its plastic base is red hot, causing me to nearly drop it. The battery must be expanding and pushing the casing out from within. I remember now that when I put the laptop in its bag this morning it seemed like a tight squeeze, and now this. Not good. I power the computer down and leave it on the bricks for a moment. What a hassle - it's the only computer I've got, and besides this current project I need it for work. My best friend through high school and university, someone I don't see nearly enough these days (once every two years, less, even though he only lives an hour away), is a whiz at fixing computers. He doesn't park his car in his garage anymore because it's wall to wall, ceiling to floor, full of hard drives, video cards, batteries, you name it. For all I know, he's running a massive cryptocurrency mining operation in there. I call him, and he says he'll meet me in an hour.

By the time the laptop has cooled enough to put it back in my bag, and I've packed up and walked across the clearing to a hole in the fence near the old grease manufacturing plant (with flying elephants, Dumbo inspired, painting on the back of its factory walls), my friend has arrived. He hops out of his car and we embrace. How long has it been this time, since before my son was born at any length, at least two, maybe three years. The thing about my friend and I is we taught each other three very important things during our formative high school and early university years – we taught each other how to laugh, how to think, and how, if I can reference Thoreau here, to not keep pace with our companions, but to instead keep step with our own music; which, when you've got a license to drive and your teenage peer group is throwing a party every other weekend fuelled by drugs and alcohol and massive dollops of banality, you're grateful to have someone in the passenger seat as you drive in the opposite direction of these parties, towards a strip of palm trees that run parallel to the runway of the regional airport that saw its last flight take off on the late seventies, down to the quiet beach, the sparkle of chemical waste factory glittering steam into salt just beyond the dunes (the sister to this grease manufacturing plant brother we've met beside this afternoon), where you trade Simpsons quotes and compare Robert Heinlein to Hermann Hesse and walk up and down the airport runway. And then it's the classic trajectory, life happens, you get jobs, those thousands of

hours of free time you used to have in abundance become fleeting seconds scraped out from between the cracks of a laundry list of infinite responsibilities, and you don't see each other for years on end.

Before looking at the computer, we park in town and walk around our old haunts. It's a Sunday, and barely anybody is around. We start near the violin repair store, beside which a popular pub, now debris, used to stand. Once, on a day that still reverberates within me, I called in sick to work and went on a slow walk across Newcastle. More than any other occasion, that day stays with me as the crucible for my love affair with the city. It was a time of heightened work-related stress and exhaustion, and I just turned off my phone and began roaming across town, from the public library through to walkways that lead to lush shaded courtyards out the back of apartment buildings I'd never seen before, onto a labyrinth of streets that rise and fall between harbourside industry and lighthouse shine, by the beachscape shadowed by military fortifications, orchard courtyards out the back of hospitals being converted into robotics warehouses, and then to here, this collapsed pub beside the violin workshop. When I pushed through the thin protective plywood barrier surrounding it, I was stunned at the long-lost civilisation found within. The pub was last active before I was born (probably closing its doors the same day, the same minute, the airport I just mentioned saw its final departure up the runway), so when I walked over its crumbled brick façade

and up the exposed concrete stairwell and saw trees growing through its middle (coming up from the dancefloor, from what I could make out of the remaining bar and seating area), I knew I'd struck psychogeographic gold.

My friend takes two rubber balls from his back pocket and passes one to me. They're patterned like miniature soccer balls. He walks, and I follow him, down the side of the violin store where an abandoned lot stands behind the old pub, facing a five-metre-tall concrete wall before a thirty-storey apartment complex. Rolling the ball around in his hand, he reaches back and launches it at the side of the concrete wall, catching it on its rebound. He does this again and tells me he's been doing this down



where he lives, on the Central Coast. It might be a way to make walking more enjoyable, taking a ball and throwing it against the sides of buildings, or it could be a reflex exercise, training hand-eye coordination; or, it could be just one of the many lightly subversive acts of social rebellion my friend has enacted over the years, and which I have subsequently learned to enact as well. Have a go, he says, and I throw my ball at the same wall and fumble the catch as it ricochets back. I try a couple more times and begin catching it consistently.

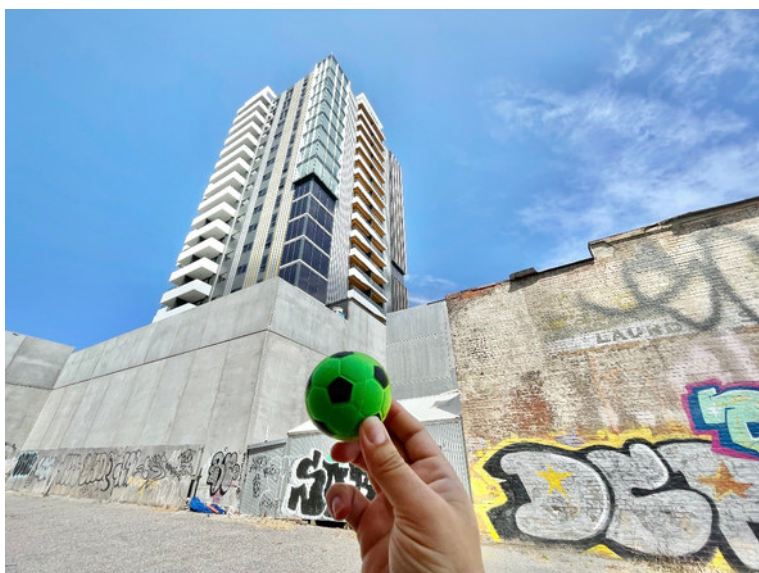
Let's try the apartment building now, he says. He walks a dozen steps forward and then runs as he winds up and throws the ball hard at the apartment building. It flies over the wall and strikes what looks like the glass elevator column of the apartments, probably ten floors up, before bouncing off and landing on the far side of the car park. As he goes to recover his ball, I throw mine, aiming for a similar spot but it strikes further left, the balcony of one of the apartments, and the ball arcs off and bounces on top of the concrete wall before landing in the dirt near my friend. He collects it and throws it back to me, and we continue down the street.

The last time we met was down his way, at a Spanish restaurant by the water. He had just built a custom virtual reality headset that he brought to show me. It was an elaborate headpiece comprised of six stained glass windows, its structure partway between a cathedral and an observatory. Each eye had three panes to look through (a

glass, darkly) from north to south which produced, in my friend's description, an algorithmic sequence of vowel-shaped filtered lights that facilitated not virtual reality but augmented reality, an overlay of digital composition on what we can otherwise see in the world around us. His big idea, untested, was that it would be wearable in the rain, so you could sit outside in a drizzle and see digital projections blending, bleeding, with the wet city around you.

What sort of projections – well, say you're walking through a park (while it's raining), and then you look into the distance and see enormous ancient statues on mountains, and then further into the sky, you see the planet Saturn so close you can count the individual ice particles of its rings. Walking up to a tree, you take a leaf in your hand and it becomes transparent, showing you a network of fibres that transition into circuitry, betraying the natural world as just an illusory computer simulation. My friend was adamant, beyond sway, that the rain, however, must be real, must be outside the glass, actually falling on and dripping down the headpiece, and not just a digital effect.

My friend asks whether it is just a bit of cognitive dissonance, a bias on our part, that we feel *The Simpsons* was such a great television comedy. And that, perhaps if we were born ten, fifteen years later, or earlier, we would choose some other show. But we both know that's not true. I tell him that I watched a scene recently when I was



looking for where they reference, quote, the ‘cynical members of Generation X’, during a bit hosted by the perennial B-grade movie actor Troy McClure, using his trademark gag of ‘You might remember me from such movies as’ and then he launches into a series of bizarre punchline titles. McClure references two films during this bit, the first of which is *The Boatjacking of Supership 79*. My friend and I laugh at this, a hilarious title, so stupid yet so on-brand for the sort of movie it represents.

What I didn’t know, I tell my friend, was that this, and other movies McClure mentions, are often based on actual films. For example, this one was based on a plane hijacking movie called *The Concorde Airport 79*. As a kid,

when we both first watched *The Simpsons* during the 90s, I just laughed at the funny title, not realising that it was referencing a real movie. So too, for the second movie McClure references in this segment, *Hydro: The Man With The Hydraulic Arms*, which again is just such a great joke title, so blatant in its obviousness, but again I didn't know that it was referencing another real film, a 60s science fiction film called *X: The Man With The X-Ray Eyes*, which just makes it all the funnier. Jokes of our childhood redoubled as new jokes in our middle age, a gift that keeps on giving.

We throw our rubber balls against a building that used to be an old boxing gymnasium, at the back of the last antique shop on the street I mentioned earlier, behind the electronics store I took a MiniDisk player once. There is a collage of bulbous graffiti tags there with a giant red robot rising above them, arms posed like it's just finishing a workout at the gym, big white curved mouth like an astronaut's visor. We aim for the mouth as if we're playing a carnival game with those plastic rotating clown heads where you're expected to deposit balls down their throats. I like the robot. When I first saw it here, some twenty years ago, I fantasised that it was constructed to take care of the city, a mechanised defender against external aggressors.

We're becoming less careful with our catches now, rarely making a clean catch on the full return but rather letting it bounce first, sometimes a couple times before we

lazily wander over to where the balls come to rest. Doing this across the city, against the side of banks, against the back of the Socialist Alliance, down through the wedding district, on the side of the conservatorium, the old Town Hall, reminds me of a scene from a book I read once where a lady, the last human on earth, travels across Europe and finds a Volkswagen van full of tennis balls at the top of the Spanish Steps in Rome. She releases hundreds of tennis balls down the steps, watching them bounce in all their variations across the piazza. It's an extraordinary scene.

The sky is getting dark as we circle back to his car. I spot a teenage lad pushing two teenage girls in a



shopping trolley down the street towards the harbour, and I realise I've previously seen this lad doing the exact same thing, a few weeks ago on a public basketball court behind the local high school, pushing two girls in a trolley. I'm unsure whether they're the same girls, but he's the same guy. I point him out to my friend and say I wrote a poem after seeing him the first time and imagined an ending near the harbour, a peculiar act of synchronicity given the direction he's heading now. I recite the poem:

The speaker on the oval
sounds like it really only
fits, say, a pasta bowl of
sound through its cone,
yet the voice is trying to
push through a bathtub
of intense verbal growl,
yelling in peak distortion,
not sound wave so much
as a brick of blunt noise.

It is carnival day, teenage
athletics, the whole school
is there, well near enough,
he's decided to stick here
on the basketball court in

audible range of the oval,
just a croquet court for the
elderly between them, he
has watched a few games
where the old timers take

their earned time striking
balls across the green like
Alice in Wonderland, 1951
original animation on VHS,
he knows because of the
scan lines, horizontal like
he wants to be, streamed
to mobile with AirPods in,
floating in the background
same playlist playing now

to block out the sound of
school spirit, not for him,
who cares, look at where
he is beneath Winter sun,
the courts here pushing a
trolley ferrying Louise and
Sally, wouldn't be caught
dead at sport, twin noodle
legs slung over the bars,
teak hair ribboning as he

swings the shopping trolley
in a broad arc, white teeth
parted as hiemal air phases
around them in a wash of
outsider celebration. Later
they'll huddle beneath the
lighthouse by the harbour
coated in abundant silence,
near enough, only crackle
from the fire and the sticks.

In his car, we both apologise for not staying in contact more. He says he's become a time thief, a thief of time; that's how he characterises himself now. Across any given week, he'll try to steal a handful of seconds and minutes, to take them away from his responsibilities, just so he'll have a clear moment to be in his own head and think his own uninterrupted thoughts. Not the sort of thoughts you have when you wake in the middle of the night: those are always a disaster, the product of entropy and being horizontal. He means the thoughts you have when you stop the car on the way to work, just off the highway, and walk beside a river marshland for a few minutes. I say I get it (says the man who fell asleep on top of a gas silo and a soccer field). And this, throwing rubber balls against the side of big buildings, reminiscing through

Simpsons quotes, I get this too. There's no need to apologise; this is what time does.

We get a drive-thru dinner and drive around town for twenty minutes. I tell my friend to hook around past the community garden, and he says we haven't even looked at your computer yet. Don't worry, I say, it's probably time for a new one anyway. We drive around King Edward Park, the lookout at Strzelecki, past James Fletcher Hospital, the ex-services club on Watt Street, past the train station my father used to work at (and his father before him), the signal box (where, as a young lad, I operated the crossing one day), on through the main drag, through the wedding district, right at the Interchange (with a milk tram passing by), and then up to Industrial Drive before merging left towards the Croation sports club.

As we get close to the footpath of the community garden I can see, near the wooden cubbyhouse, a half dozen guys standing around an oil drum full of flames. I ask my friend to slow down, to get a look at what's going on. From what I can see in the illumination of the fire, there are broken alcohol bottles scattered around the garden, and also the foosball table, split in the middle as if it had been jumped on. The box of wooden chess pieces sit nearby, and, as I look into the flames coming out the oil drum, I can see a castle and a knight sticking out the top, and also the wooden cut out of the worm wearing a hat. My friend turns his car around and drives past again, and I can see now the storage shed has been busted open and the

tools are all scattered. I say to my friend, turn the car around once more, so I'm on the side facing the garden.

Reaching into the backseat, I take the laptop from my bag. It takes a lot of force to squeeze it out - the battery has constantly been swelling. I lean out the window and throw it, like an asymmetrical frisbee with a swollen thyroid, directly at the fire. It might be a result of the practice I've had these past few hours throwing balls at buildings that the laptop goes straight into the oil drum and, seconds later, explodes like cannon fire.

IV

Willow trees posed like fireworks in a state of suspended animation, paused mid-cascade, show petal flutter as embers above crushed dirt roadside trajectory. We're somewhat racing against the sun, somewhat lost on the Yango Creek Road somewhere in Wollombi, and with our internet data not sending any new information to the maps on our phones, we're at the mercy of the hills out here. Every ten minutes we see another house, but they're unapproachable, set far back in pockets of bushland. This is definitely the road we're meant to be on, my wife confirms the address, Yango Creek Road. We should be seeing the sign for a winery and then, behind that, the cabin we're staying in for a couple of nights, convict built and owned for generations, now a rentable residence.

But wait, we're on Upper Yango Creek Road, and deep causeways filled with lakes of water every two hundred metres threaten to lift our car away from the traction of the road. This is not a road for cars, surely, at least not one like ours without a periscope. We keep turning around and returning the way we've come, sure we've missed a sign or a turnoff somewhere, before turning back around and continuing on the same road, the only direction left, to see the road through to its end. There is one particular causeway that keeps blocking us, deeper than the others - I'm sure we can't get through it. We approach it again, and I look starboard and point out the first person I've seen out here for the past hour, a young boy of around eight or nine, riding a beat-up red pushbike

towards this deepest of causeways.

He'll never make it; what's he doing. My daughter puts her window down to get a better look, so too my son, craning his neck to see what we're talking about. The boy doesn't even seem to register that we're there. He rides at full speed towards the water and just glides on through, barely getting his bike pedals wet. Unbelievable, it can't be that shallow. I have a feeling this will be like that scene from the 1960s film *It's A Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*, where a young boy shows Phil Silvers how to drive his convertible across a patch of river, stepping with light feet across the apparently shallow waters before Silvers drives in and immediately feels the car taken by the deep river and floated away while the tricky young boy waves goodbye. Regardless, I put my foot down and accelerate towards, and then through, the causeway, which is far deeper than the cycling lad experienced, splashing water up over our bonnet, leading me to think that he must have ridden on a raised ridge that only he knew about.

Twenty minutes later, with only an orange rind of sunlight left on the horizon, we find the winery, hallelujah, and drive up to the cabin. The owner meets us and says they tried to phone, expecting us hours ago. Yes, I say, we drove for kilometres around Upper Yango Creek Road, and he says, oh man, you must have come across some deep causeways, that route is not meant for cars like yours, and I nod and agree. He says, you just needed to head that way, and he points in the opposite direction to

which we came, he says we're only fifty meters from the main intersection in town, you must have driven straight past it. Oh well, that's the way we'll leave.

He shows us inside the cabin, the basket of kindling and newspaper we can use to start a fire on a cold night like this one, the light switches, and gives a little history on the place. He provides advice, too, like if wombats come to the front door, we aren't to let them in. With all the rain out here lately, the wombats, who usually live amongst the winery's vines, have had their burrows flooded out, so they're looking for other quarters. And while it might seem fun to let a wombat in the house, trust me, he says, it takes at least four adults with brooms and much pulling and pushing to get the wombat back outside again. We all vow to not let a wombat in the cabin, and the owner bids goodnight and leaves us to unpack.



The cabin is wonderful - built slab walled from flitches split from local ironbark trunks in the 1840s, and there are etchings carved into the walls by the children of the original builder showing how tall they were growing across a couple of birthdays. After we unpack, we all find our sleeping quarters for the night. My daughter takes a single bed in the backroom by herself, my son and wife together in a double bed next door, and I take a little bed at the other end of the cabin in what used to be the old kitchen, sat beside a cast iron stove and the skull of a cow, with a little window that will catch the morning light at the bedhead.

Early the following morning I get up, quietly creak across the cabin, and head outside for a wander. I start to get a better sense of the area, after our late arrival showed little, but still not a complete view as there is much heavy mist blanketing the tree line beyond the initial necklace of oak and conifer. In the yard, immediately outside the cabin, there is a round wooden table with four nestled benches beside a gas barbeque. Looking further beyond this point sees the road we drove up last night, while to the left is a pathway that leads to the vineyard and turning to the right leads to some uncertain point, a lemon tree and a boulder, but otherwise the landscape in that direction is too fog laden to clarify.

I head towards what looks like a little utility shed sitting alone on a dewy slope. The air is full of birdsong, although at the time I could not name the performers. In

the same way I only have a glancing sense of the type of trees in an area, I could not pick the species of birds until, later in the afternoon, I looked through a guidebook in the cabin on local flora and fauna, and found photos and aural descriptions of the birds that matched what I heard that morning. Yellow-faced Honeyeaters, sometimes called quitchup according to the guide because of their two-note ostinato that sounds like ‘chick-up, chick-up’, fit the description for one of the most prominent vocalists.

Listening to them trill reminded me of an essay I read some twenty years ago on birdsongs, when a presenter at a conference on the topic played a trick on the audience - they were apparently of the impression that extended birdsongs could not be realistically created through human composition due to birds unique, inhuman, capacity for improvisation - by playing a recording of a supposed bird that was, shortly after, revealed to simply be a recording of his own whistling, sped up using digital software, which, if anything, surely just reinforces the inhuman element to the structure of birdsong melodies.

When I get to the utility shed, a mostly dilapidated weatherboard structure with no windows, I see on the closed door what look like pencil markings drawn over many times to make the lines bolder. A tidy script in all capitals reads PRINT ROOM, AUTHORISED PERSONNEL ONLY, beneath which sits an illustration of the three-pronged nuclear symbol and a sketch of an echidna, with the same script but smaller within the quills

which reads BY ORDER OF NORMAN. There are other versions, lighter and harder to make out, of the echidna in different renderings. One of them reminds me of the old World War 2 era graffiti 'Kilroy was here' which, positioned beside the nuclear symbol, might be intentional.

Further down the direction I'm going, across a wide sloping field of increasingly long and wet grass, I see another structure, a half dozen beams supporting two broad sheets of corrugated iron above two rusted utility vehicles, one with a yellow cab and one without discernible colour. Beyond this point must be a river that, while out of view, is becoming increasingly resonant. I start to head towards it, but the ground is so slushy I head back to higher ground, to a dirt pathway that passes through a tunnel of trees.

As I walk through this beautiful morning landscape, I daydream about what it would be like to live out here. In the same way that I feel like Newcastle is one crucial step removed from Sydney - a regional lifestyle separated from the bustling cosmopolis - this is a further step away, moving from regional to rural. Could I wander this route every morning, at peace with clockwork admiration of deteriorating physical structures, building up a catalogue within my mind of the surrounding flora and fauna so I could point out a leaf to my children and say, that's from a narrow-leaved orangebar, or would I miss the stormwater drain, the concrete slopes of the government

buildings all empty on a Sunday morning. When I see a tree growing through the second floor of a collapsed tavern, is this where I prefer my trees to be, planted within the ruins of civilisation, rather than unspoiled, possibly tedious, abundance. Perhaps that is why I've mostly only noticed the constructed world out here rather than the far more copious, unnameable natural other.

I take out of my pocket a packet of light-sensitive paper, cyanotype the packet says, given to me by my sister-in-law on some previous birthday. It is used to create, quoting the packet, 'photographic type prints using sun and water'. I'd say there is just enough sunlight now for this to work, and I can see a little trough of water on the path up ahead, near the print room building ironically enough, the coincidence of the former, or current, function of that building only just now coming to mind with what I'm about to attempt. The instructions say to find an item, like a leaf or small twig, and place it within the provided materials, beneath an acrylic sheet and above a piece of cyanotype paper that sits on top of a piece of cardboard.

A couple of minutes of looking for a suitable object on the ground and in the surrounding branches turns up a pair of splayed leaves fallen beneath a tree, one larger than the other, conjoined at their base by a forking stem. The way they are joined is interesting, not because it is unusual to see stems branch out in this way, but you usually see it, to my understanding, within a standard network of smaller, less developed leaves, not seated

within such a defined Y structure that support such large outgrowths. In a way, it looks as though one leaf was meant to grow there, but then two developed in a state of antinomicity. I press the twins within the sandwich of photographic resources, wait five minutes, rinse the blue paper in the little trough for a minute and then leave it to dry on the cardboard bed. What results is an x-ray that shows with precision all the fractal veins beneath the surface of the leaves, pressed with such gentle clarity by the chemical reaction. Thinking of which, I empty the trough of water just in case any latent chemicals remain.

On the walk back to the cabin, I see my wife sitting in a chair on the porch. She is wearing her pyjamas; our kids must still be asleep inside. I take a seat next to her and we look out at the mist together, watch as it begins to scatter and dissolve with every new crisp, autumnal



sunbeam that emerges from above the tree line. She asks me where I wandered to - I describe the print room, the pencil sketches of the echidna, the utility vehicles, the sound of the river. We discuss plans for the day, what to make for breakfast, how the weather is looking, when to make a little trip into the local township. She reminds me about the boy on the pushbike who glides through the seemingly shallow causeway and we both laugh about it, relieved that we made it safely here last night before all the light disappeared.

She asks me if I've given any thought to why I threw a laptop with a damaged battery into a barrel of fire, creating, essentially, a bomb in a bin. Have I heard if anyone was hurt, or what my friend thought of the whole thing, and whether anyone saw him drive away from the scene. I say I haven't heard anything; it hasn't seemed to make the papers, perhaps it was a non-issue. She asks if I'm just retroactively downplaying what happened, but I honestly don't know. Perhaps I mistook the reaction after I threw the laptop into the bin, maybe I missed, the explosion could have been a fusion of the sound of a car backfiring and something else already in the barrel that caused a sudden burst of fire, if there even was a sudden burst. I really can't accurately recall what happened. Maybe I exaggerated the whole thing in order to have an excuse to get away for a couple of days.

My wife says, well, if you threw a laptop out the window of a moving car with the intention of it exploding

in the way you, either accurately or not, imagined - fantasised about in vivid description, when you told me what you thought happened - then you probably did need to get away for a couple of days. She looks at me and then looks out to the empty road we drove down yesterday. For someone, she says, who spends such a lot of time reading and thinking and remembering, you sure do some dumb things sometimes. You would think, she continues, that you would make better choices, but here are you, nearly forty and throwing laptops out of car windows. I feel like saying, and don't forget, I'd spent the day throwing rubber balls against the side of apartment buildings after recording, and then time stretching, audio of a train to create a commemorative song for the opening of a new section of a community garden. But instead, I say, that's the thing though, isn't it - if I was any good at doing the right thing in the world of the living, then I wouldn't spend so much time in my memories and my books.

I see a sketchbook next to my wife, and I ask whether she's been doing any drawing since she's been up this morning. A little, she says, but mostly she's been sketching and thinking about the rural childhood world she visits in her dreams. My wife grew up in [redacted], a couple of streets away from hectares of expansive, seemingly infinite bushland. When she was a young girl, she would be taken on walks by her grandmother, where both my wife and her sister would walk their grandmother's two dogs a little way into the bush, just to

where the coal train line tacked against the edge of the trees. The trains would rarely roll through during the day, they mostly travelled at night, and my wife's grandmother showed my wife and her sister how to tape two-cent coins to the track that, the following day, they would recover as little stretched copper bowls just wide enough to fit a raindrop in.

My wife would always ask to go further into the bush, but they would never proceed beyond the train line, and it was not until some years later, into high school, that she and her friends would begin to go deeper in. They would push through the scrub in the direction of a metal water pipe that they'd then climb up and walk on until it reached a small clearing where wild horses grazed, where my wife and her friends would sit and draw and talk and watch the horses, spellbound, until it got late. A half-decade later, after a series of eye surgeries, she would return to the bush again, pushing even further in, where she found a dam and a raised hilltop that looked over a span of the area.

It was not until she left [redacted] and moved out with me into our first home in her twenties that she started to have recurring dreams about the rural bushland of her younger years. The dreams were always exaggerations of her actual experiences, as dreams almost entirely are, but the embellishments were mostly ones of scale – for example, instead of coming across a moderately sized dam, it would be an immense inland lake, and instead of a

raise hilltop, she would ascend the heights of a mountain that, at its apogee, shepherded an array of fantastical horse-like beasts. This embellishment of scale makes sense, of course, given the impression of immeasurable vastness the bushland cast on my wife's childhood senses. And I guess, too, you could put the recurrence of the dreams down to the impact this sense of otherness maintained on her across the years: a vision of something surreal, in the base sense of the word - the French word for beyond, *sur*, and real, *réalisme* - an image of this world but taken further into the believably impossible, the sort of experience that gives birth to artistry.

We were talking about this dream version of [redacted] a week ago when we went to visit my wife's parents, and for some reason that I cannot recall, we drove down a side street that veers off from the main road, towards the bush, perhaps in order to turn around or check out a business we thought we saw down there. She had never been down this road in all her years of living in [redacted], and as we got to the end of the street, I could see a rail line and, beyond this, what looked like the shore of a lake. I parked the car and asked if she wanted to get out and look with me, but she did not, so I quickly trekked across the rail and saw, with no word of a lie, a great inland lake, just as my wife had described it from her dreams. I used to work around this area some decade earlier as a teacher and thought I knew the area reasonably well, and I had no idea a lake of this proportion was out



this way. For a couple of minutes I just stared around its coastline, at the ropes set up by kids to swing into the water during the warmer months, at this irrational ocean. I took a photo to show my wife, but when I told her what I'd seen, she said no, don't show me.

She asks if I've been working on anything lately. I read her a poem I wrote the other day, based on a moment from the previous year, when our son was one, after he picked up a yellow bucket in our backyard during a particularly windy afternoon and threw it around his body in what seemed like an effort to catch the wind.

It goes:

A small boy dressed in grey
walks into the wind with a yellow bucket.

He is unsteady on his feet as he is
only a few months having learned the posture.

The wind torrents with prestorm fervour
and the boy swings his arms and yells
as his bucket collects up the air.

With repeated shouts the boy looks into
the sky and causes me to wonder
whether he is chastising the wind or joining it
in its revelry, urging it to roar on.

But then the bucket hangs still beside
the little legs of the boy as the air
goes quiet, perhaps answering his yells

by whispering that it will not be commanded
to blow by this young master

nor will it be contained by his
yellow wind bucket.

My wife asks me what I think the poem means, and I say something like it's just a lyrical description of youth observed. She then says that I have a peculiar relationship with nature, that I always have, that I've modelled myself somewhat after Faust, seeking to control nature as a way of emotionally transposing the passing of time. What I'm asking, she says, is what your wind bucket is going to be. This doesn't make any sense to me; I ask for examples. She shrugs, oh you know - the way you create a fetish of the constructed world, favouring car parks over natural parks; how excited you got, in a transgressive way, when you discovered the tree that grew through the middle of the dilapidated tavern more than you've ever been interested in non-dilapidated-tavern based flora; the way you mediate nature by enjoying it most through the window of a train; and the whole community garden thing, you don't know how to garden, to provide wildlife with the care it requires, so what do you do, you philosophise, you use nature for your metaphors and abstractions, and when the people at the garden ask you to write organ music to commemorate the garden, what do you do - you record the sound of a passing train.

We hear our son, through the window behind us, begin to stir in bed. Soon he and our daughter rise, and we have breakfast together, watching a little wren tap on the kitchen window from the outside. Our son heads outside to look for where the wren is coming from, noticing it

bounce back and forth between the window and a little orange tree. There is a boulder behind the orange tree that our son clambers up on to survey the region, the fog having lifted now, revealing more of the map.

For the rest of the day we explore the area around the cabin. Our daughter meets a black and white terrier named Charlie who lives at the nearby vineyard. They run around together, weaving in and out of trees, before Charlie stops and darts his attention down the dirt driveway where our son is riding his bike. It isn't our son that Charlie is interested in, however - it is the three young kangaroos bounding across the vineyard, over a wooden bridge that traverses a small river and into the neighbouring field. Charlie gives chase for two hundred metres before he stops in a tuck of dust and watches the kangaroo disappear through a line of trees. Either he has given up on catching them, or he's satisfied that his job is done.

My wife and daughter set up at the wooden table in the yard facing the cabin, each with a sketchbook, drawing and talking while I take my son down to see the utility vehicles. With my phone, I take photos of him in the back of their trays, and he asks to see the pictures and then takes some of his own, of the sky, of his gumboots. As the day later comes to a close, we get in the car and, making sure to follow the right directions, we head into the little township nearby, where we stop at a pub for dinner. We notice a few points of interest we intend to check out the

next day – an art gallery, a café that looks good for lunch, and an antique store with a robot made of old computer circuit boards out front. In the pub, we find a table outside on the veranda so we can watch the sunset. I head to the bar area to get drinks for everybody and notice that the bar is in a separate room, nearly a separate building to the kitchen we order from. While I'm pouring glasses of water, I listen in on a joke the publican is telling a lady who looks like she also works there, she's sitting in the corner sorting through what look like receipts or invoices. The publican tells the old joke about the church minister and the gardener. A church minister walks down a street and sees a beautifully tendered garden. The grass is like a bowling green - the flowers, glorious in their colours and their engineered bedding arrangements, smile their faces towards the sun, and the minister sees the gardener and says, oh, what a testimony to the grace of god this garden is. And then the gardener looks up and says, oh no, you should have seen this place when it was left up to god.

The pub does a good dinner. My wife and I play cards while our daughter reads and our son flies a toy plane above the table. We carefully drive back to the cabin, in darkness, and go to bed. The next morning I wake up in my little bed beside the cast iron stove, single beams of blue morning sunlight flickering against the wooden walls and ceiling, phasing to a warmer hue as the trees that the sun is filtering through shuffle their fruit to a higher angle beneath a breeze building outside, bouncing

light against oranges and lemons which, to my delight, cause a glisten of shuffling refractions that dance back and forth as if against a surface of water. I think about the day ahead, about going to that antique store with the robot out front. The robot, standing some six feet tall, had, from what I can recall, an arm made out of what looked like a piece of farming equipment with pincers at the end, like a pneumatic hand that could loosen and tighten its grip. Lying here now, it reminds me of a robot I read about in a medical article that was created to facilitate remote gardening. The idea was that gardening is, for some people, a terrific therapeutic activity, and that it would be interesting to see the impact on patients who are unable to leave bed for many months if they were able to engage in



a bit of gardening. But rather than bring in a little watering can and a pot plant to the patient's bedside, a group of technologists created a garden of some considerable size, located in a university hundreds of kilometres from the hospital, that could be tended to by the patient who would operate a remote control that activated a robotic arm positioned in the garden. The remote control sent a signal to the arm, via early internet, and told it to turn, dig a hole in the soil, turn again, pick up a packet of seeds, deposit the seeds in the garden, pick up a hose, and so on. The impact on the patients was apparently very positive, leading to results summarised by the researchers that, while nothing beats actually being amongst real nature, it is also true that engaging with a virtual nature is better than no nature at all.

I ruminate on the conversation my wife and I had the previous morning on the veranda, when she made those comments about my relationship with nature and time. When I think back to that joke I heard at the pub last night, about the gardener and the church minister, the thing I take away from it this morning is almost a reversal of the intended punchline. The intention of the joke is to point out that, left to its own devices, nature is a tangle of unsightly mess, but that with nurturing, through culture, it can be made good. This isn't what I think, though. What I think, is that before the gardener was present, the garden wasn't anything - it wasn't good, it wasn't bad, it wasn't correct nor incorrect. It was something beyond this,

outside of our judgement, our language. The presence of the gardener is the birth of subjectivity, and with it, the need to tell a story about nature that has a beginning, a middle and an end. A timeline. No way to get around it - our waking lives needs stories like our lungs need oxygen, otherwise they collapse. And what better stories to tell than those about *nature* - a veiled way of talking about ourselves without giving a face to our narcissism, and a way of talking about the passing of time as though it's nothing to do with us.

Once we are all up for the day, we head back to the little township and check out the antique store. My son finds an old tricycle, what my parents would have called a dinky - thin metal blue handlebars, white plastic seat, a plastic bucket attached beneath the rear for carrying a teddy bear. I show my daughter an eight-millimetre film projector, it's in terrific condition. A label affixed reads Hanimex Pty Ltd Sydney Melbourne Brisbane Adelaide Perth, an Australian manufacturer or the store that sold it, I'm not sure. We talk about whether we should get it and play old movies against our garage back at home, hang a white sheet and create an outdoor cinema in our yard. I examine the parts, the lens. The owner of the antique store walks over and tells me that if I'm just interested in parts, and not the full projector, there is a box beneath the cabinet full of spare components. I look through and find an assortment of projector and camera pieces, little glass prisms and magnifying devices. My son taps me on the



leg, looking at me through a small field telescope that is missing something from its end, and he says, you're upside-down (or, in his articulation, you're upsy-down).

The owner tells my wife they have some unique sculptures out behind the store, and shows her and our son and daughter the way there. I stay behind inside and look around. I'm starting to put together an idea for something I can build, perhaps. A rush of inspiration fills me, my memories of those Sydney days of the hackathon and the wearable device my team and I dreamed up, and my Apple days, too - I see myself rising up to the thirteenth floor, flying above the city, above distant countries, the runway in Denpasar, the Indian Ocean washing into the South Pacific, the beach downwind from the chemical plant beside the runway of the long-closed regional airport my

friend and I would sit on and talk; and a poem springs to mind, one I wrote while watching my son and daughter during a vibrant Summer sunset, infused with all the sensory pleasures of the season that activate within me a particularly wistful sense of longing and, why not just come out and say it, the sorrow of wanting to hold back the days and keep my children forever young. From a section towards the middle of the poem:

Which evening is this,
food descriptions of the sky:
the sun directed upwards to
caramelize the clouds hence
sheets of foamed apricot with
pink grapefruit frosting hung
on the threads two kilometres
above the Broadmeadow rail,

and which evening is this one
where my son sees the boom
gate rise and fall like the arm
of adherence, of compliance,
or is this the evening in which
everybody is still alive, or is it
the one where only faint insects
still patrol the bogey skyline.

From positively charged
void to which evening is this,
one month compressed years
say yonks when my daughter
and I rode our cargo bike to
the grocery store for chips, a
pack of the most spicy chilli
danger snacks just borderline

legal, and then we devoured
them and exhaled fire up the
narrow sundown corridors of
Hamilton so our throats could
enact conditions of sky, space,
from black palette come light
to roast the heavens, a Caspar
David Friedrich history

of clouds, a genealogy of the
metaphor projecting up sunset
moonrise vocabularies asking
the question, which evening is
this one dad. Up the motorway
listening to the discography of
The Beatles, at Coolongolook
we pause for a plate of foamed

apricots dappled with a glance
of pink grapefruit frosting, just
enough to get us through until
makinono that evening, topple
into a booth, two bowls, a glass
or maybe a couple more glasses
please, my wife and I impostng
our postures on arcade cabinets

in that liminal arena bolted onto
this cinema, never another soul
there in our visits, only insects
from the observatory, the sky or
maybe a half dozen more skies,
because which evening is this
particular bracket of fading, and
if I look around at thirty nine,

how many years passed now
since the sun fell all too quickly.
Gravity has gone out of tune, the
sun cannot leave although it has
already departed, its image stuck
in the evening sky like a ghost of
phosphor lacking a luminescence
as you see in computer monitors

with a bad case of burn in, a spot
in the sky that still remains when
night collapses form, what Hegel
used to see at the end of his days,
subject as object, nostalgic father
as time wary son, because the way
to keep two small pies warm for
the ride home is to buy twenty

and use the warmth of the many
to blanket the couple.



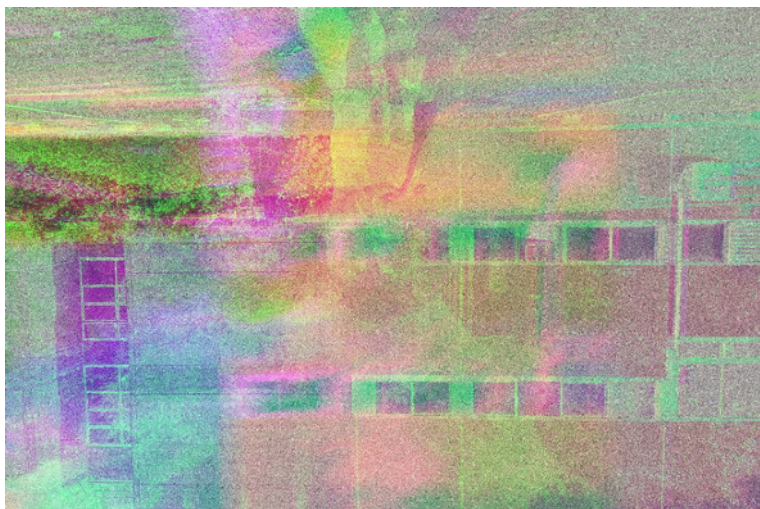
For the past week it's been particularly rainy out. I've been tinkering in my garage with some of the components I picked up from the antique shop and some bits of circuitry I have stashed in boxes, things my friend and I used to mess around with in our younger days, and while I cannot fix the bloated battery of an overworked laptop, I can solder wires together and hook up electronics kits bought from hobby stores. I've had an idea for a little device – a wafer-thin projector, just big enough to fire a few lines of vision out of, with a GPS module the size of a

pencil eraser and a SIM card attached to the back. The idea is that the device can detect its location and search for any photos that you've previously taken there, and then project them out of the lens.

My son and I return to the TAFE. Another Saturday morning ripe for exploration, up and down concrete stairs and ramps to where we came upon the foundry with all those offcuts of metal a fortnight earlier. Today my daughter has joined us, too - she wants to tell me about a movie coming out soon that she's excited to watch. We have to be careful where we walk because the ground is dotted with puddles, just like it was the other weekend when my son rolled metal cylinders through them. At the moment, he's jumping on a wooden pallet, rocking it back and forth across the uneven ground. I take a photo of him, and my daughter reminds me that she used to do the same thing here, ten years earlier.

From my bag, I take out the little projector I've made. Seated on a waterproof shield, I carefully place it on the surface of a puddle, where it bobs like a little paper boat. It takes a half minute for it to turn on and pick up a signal, but then you can see it - a multicoloured light peeling out of the lens. The light from the lens skims across the water, touching down at an acute angle before ricocheting off and shining up at the base of the brick wall in front of us, creating a framed image the size of a postcard. As you bend down to get a closer look, you can see a shimmering flicker of photos, transitioning in and

out of each other as the puddle warbles. They are photos I've taken on this spot in the past – my son just now on the pallet, my son holding a metal offcut, my son on his red bike, and then the bike stretches into a scooter, my daughter refracting into view, my daughter at seven holding two small toy animals and dancing them across a piece of timber, my daughter in her preschool clothes balancing on a pallet just like the one before us now, and now photos of the area without my son or my daughter, just triangles of light and shadow, where I once gazed and thought of who knows what, perhaps my wife, perhaps dreams of my younger self, perhaps barely anything at all, distracted, recognising nothing of what would come to fill this seemingly vacant territory, a record of time adored.



Epilogue

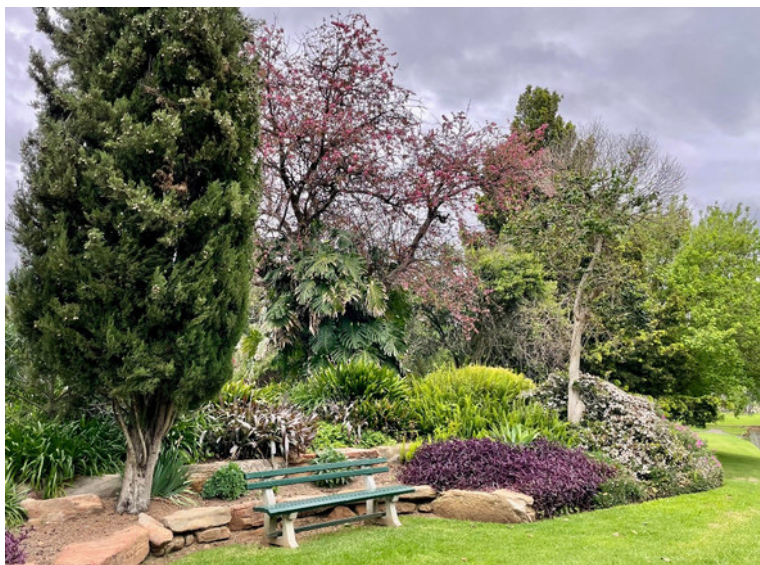
I recently had an interesting experience involving scale. During my first afternoon of an interstate work trip, I came across a little Japanese-styled garden on the walk back from the office to the hotel where I was staying. It just seemed to pop out of nowhere - I had been walking through some light bushland that connected, across sporting fields, business quadrants of the outer CBD, when I noticed a wooden gatehouse made of two timber columns and thin slats of bamboo.

The garden, shadowed by nearby administrative buildings for finance and the state department of education, only took a couple of minutes to walk around, and was an absolute sensory delight - waterfalls fed into a pond, which a sign notes is in the shape for the Japanese word for shin, meaning 'heart' or 'soul', surrounded by granite lanterns, a spill of conifer and pine trees threading between camellia and azalea plants, bamboo pipes clacking every couple of footsteps against rocks, and on the final turn back to the entrance there was a little open-air teahouse beside a sea of raked sand.

It felt like such a treat to find this garden oasis on what was otherwise a routine and uninspired walk back to an empty hotel room after a day of computer screens bathed in pale grey spreadsheets. Little did I know that on the following afternoon I would, on a return walk back to the hotel, approaching from a different direction, come across another garden. At first, it looked like a sister garden to the Japanese-styled one, with similar foliage and

a waterfall near its entrance. However, it was clear that this park was many factors larger than the one I visited yesterday. For one thing, I couldn't determine where the park's boundaries were located - rolling hills of finely tended grass weaved footpaths across a duck-filled river far beyond what I had anticipated the depth of the environment to be. Pockets of trees with benches beneath and further groves of waterfalls, many with intricate fountains embedded, kept appearing at every turn.

I had two books with me - a hardcover of Les Murray's posthumous poems, and Gerald Murnane's purported last work - which I had only expected to read either in the hotel room or on the plane home, but which I was able to enjoy here on a comfortable bench on the highest rise of the park that I had so far discovered,



cradled by a thicket of banksia and saltbush that housed a flickering kaleidoscope of butterflies. Every few minutes, I looked up from the books and across the expanse towards a silhouette of city as the sun gradually fell behind towers. This is the spot, I thought, that I will return to tomorrow afternoon on my final day here. I was looking forward to it all evening - waking up the next morning, getting through the work day, and heading back to this bench as soon as possible, good weather willing - until a brief conversation with a colleague provided me with a new plan.

One of my colleagues came over to me while I sat down for dinner in the hotel restaurant and asked what I had been up to that afternoon. I told them about the park, and they asked if I meant the Botanical Gardens, as that is where they had been. It's possible, I replied - although I didn't see any signs giving the area a name, from their description it sounded somewhat similar. When I told them the direction I took to get there, they said no, those aren't the Botanical Gardens, they're at the other end of the road. I took out my phone and sure enough, the Botanical Gardens were located in an area I hadn't wandered yet. They opened at six in the morning, according to the description on their website, and from the current weather report it looked as though it might rain the following afternoon, so if I was to have a chance to visit these gardens before I flew back home I would need to go there before work.

On my walk there the following morning, just before six, I kept spotting fields and parkland that I was sure must be the gardens, and on a few occasions I was about to walk more closely towards them and enjoy what I could see, although something told me that I wasn't quite there yet. That 'something' could have been my body picking up on some sub-audible vibration of immense tracts of chlorophyll that were calling, some fifteen minutes further up the road, behind ten-metre tall limestone gates that ceremoniously welcomed visitors to the actual Botanic Gardens. Not that there were any visitors I could see so far, only a few minutes after opening hours commenced, as I walked into the grandest and most expansive garden I'd ever witnessed.

The limestone gates were just toys rendered in miniature compared with the elm trees that dwarfed the entrance (and if the gates were made to look like toys from a garden play set, then what was I, not even a toy, just a little illustration on a sticker from the bottom of the box), creating an artificial night on this bright Spring morning, offering multiple tunnels of foliage to explore, of which I took an immediate right towards what looked like a latticed gazebo. Through the gazebo I could see more gates, these ones adorned with stone spheres, that bracketed a dark pond surrounded by further giant elms, Moreton Bay Figs, and what look like strawberry trees with sawtooth leaves the size of dinner plates. I keep thinking that the scene looks like something crafted in a



fantasy novel, anticipating a mist rising from the water to reveal a sword-wielding maiden lifted up on the head of a leathery water beast. A bronze plaque on one of the gate columns reads that they were erected in the fifties by the Australian American Association in gratitude for military support given by the United States during World War 2.

It is apparent, even without having any real sense of the scale of the place, that this is not a garden to be traversed in a brief morning visit, or even potentially many hours of walking. The city is just a haphazard whisper barely recognisable only some minutes into the immediate layer of the garden, to say nothing of how quickly any sense of the outside world is forgotten as meadows unfurl towards glimpses now of sunlight on

hilltops, beyond the green canopies that have covered my walk so far. As I get to the top of one of the hilltops, I let my eyes trace the visible panorama to get my bearings, which only leads to a more wondrous state of uncertainty as an impossible vastness presents itself. I see a great sandstone manor sitting at the base of the meadow I'm currently on top of, a building that looks like it could house the great Moreton Bay Figs I've just been looking up at, only to see a tree just beyond this building, how could I have not seen it before, that stands a good three or four times the height of this now diminutive looking utility shed. Again, scale - like the feeling of considering the little Japanese garden compared with the parkland I found the following afternoon, now juxtaposed with the immensity of these Botanic Gardens, like nested Matryoshka dolls, so too the rising contrast between the grand gates at the entrance with the figs that dwarfed them, this sandstone manor with the tree that lives above its rooftop, and what beyond here, who is to say it doesn't just keep getting bigger the further you go in, a volcanic ridge above the trees, a temple with a bridge to the moon at its apogee. I half expect to look down at my watch and see the hands spinning like a compass above a magnetic pole.

Sprinkled around the gardens, sometimes in the middle of an open field, other times standing in the middle of a necklace of trees or standing on platforms at the mouths of ponds, are classical Greek-styled marble

statues, not actually made from marble but rather a smooth-grained composite. They are the visual equivalent of running a wet finger over the rim of a crystal glass of water, resonating a bell-like, almost alien tone, that clears an aesthetic space amongst the rough edges of the flora via the presence of these portraits of immaculate smoothness. More buildings too are found after turning down a pipeline of wisteria - a glass cube housing water lilies, a white panelled dome that rises via an infinite parabola, and another glass building, a hot house gilded in yellow and deep blue matrices of framework that follow a critical symmetry of form. The sun is high enough to fill the building with light dazzle, like noon sparkle on salt water, and it is already very warm inside, or perhaps still warm; it might retain its heat overnight. There are varieties of cacti, mainly from Madagascar, inside, although it is the glass panels I keep looking up at, feeling their magnifying





warmth on my skin. Perhaps I too am a cactus, here, ready to be planted for a century.

Being in this hot house reminds me of standing in the butterfly garden in Singapore airport some years ago. I

arrived at the airport at around seven in the evening, thinking that I'd given myself just enough time to get through check-in, only to realise that I had miscounted and actually had many hours, into the very early morning, before I would be taking off. This didn't worry me, though - it was a thrill to realise I had all this time up my sleeve to explore what was immediately apparent as not a standard airport terminal. After looking in at one of the many cinemas, layers of sleeping pod stacks, multi-story restaurants and towering geometric statues of water and light, I caught a glimpse of a sign pointing to the butterfly garden and was delighted not just with what you'd expect to find in there, but also that you could see outside to the tarmac where a Boeing 777 and Airbus A350 sat waiting for their cue. I stared at this visual dichotomy for twenty minutes, this split between the artificially natural flora of the garden - tiny, naked white butterflies flitting between synthetically orchestrated fern canopies - and the naturally artificial birds outside, folded in light-weight aluminium, lavishly adorned pilots seated behind their eyes, above their beaks, waiting to part clouds.

All night I wandered the airport, occasionally running into colleagues from the work conference I'd been at that week, eating dinner at a music-themed restaurant at nine o'clock only to forget about that meal and have another dinner after midnight at a barbeque grill eatery on a high balcony overlooking a hive of bars and interactive entertainment venues. I took trains that ferried passengers

back and forth between terminals, through gaps in the walkways, between jewellery and high fashion outlets, with no idea which terminal I was at in relation to the others. For a good two hours I walked around to see if I could find a way to get some fresh air, any sort of opening in this place, eventually finding a winding stairwell that led to an elevated outdoor area with a bar, a smoking area, and a tall neon cactus. I looked at a couple sitting there, opposites in every physical dimension possible, including his Winter attire and her tropical kimono, and wondered who they were and what their lives were like sitting here in this impossible location, an area only just discovered and illuminated by consciousness, never to be seen again. Did they too feel this sense of scale, forever expanding.



A month after the work trip that saw me in the Botanic Gardens, I travelled interstate again, further south this time, to a beautiful little town where I helped present a workshop for a special education school. It was not quite snowing there, but it felt like it had the potential, that waking up the following morning could reasonably witness a sheet of white cover the region. During the course of the two-day workshop, I overheard the principal of the school struggle with staffing. They had just lost a teacher to another school only a day before the term was set to begin, and the principal, who I had met some years earlier at an autism conference, was ringing everybody and anybody to help cover the class temporarily until they could re-interview for a replacement as soon as possible. After a phone call home to my wife, and then to my boss, I took the principal aside and said that, if he'd like, I'd be happy to stay on for the rest of the week and cover the class, if that helped give a bit more time to get someone more permanent in. They phoned the pub I was staying at and had them extend my stay until the weekend, and with that, I was heading back to my room that afternoon to start preparing a few lesson plans.

I don't quite know what it was that made me offer to help out - I'd like to think it was by virtue of wanting to do the right thing, helping someone out, particularly the kids at the school, in a time of need. Maybe it was that I missed teaching and wanted to show myself that I could still do it, or perhaps I wanted a bit of an ego boost, to feel

like I had flown in here with my exalted career in my wings, ready to save the day. But quite honestly, I think the primary motivation was to have the opportunity to do this, right here, to sit in a cosy pub of an evening, beside a fireplace, and look out the far window at dark fields and sparse townships with billowing chimneys. I missed my children and my wife, but it was only for a couple more days, and I had a project, other than teaching, that I wanted a little time for.

Since thinking about my experience of *scale* in the gardens and at Singapore airport, I began pondering the organ composition that the coordinator of the community garden, next to the Croatian sports club, asked me to compose. It wasn't just the polysemous nature of the word *scale* and drawing a connection between a sense of physical dimension and the span of musical scales, but instead I'd had a vision for a pipe organ composition that was not just for one organ, but for three. The idea came to me as I flew back into Newcastle after the gardens, looking down into the city and noticing three car parks, some of the tallest physical structures in the CBD, that were all set for decommission, ready to be torn down for new apartment buildings.

It will come as no surprise that I have enjoyed many walks through these car parks over the years. One, in particular, the Bolton Street car park, gives the most uninterrupted view of the city that can be found anywhere around and has been a source of inspiration to me many

times (my first attempt at a novel was birthed at the top of that car park, and features prominently in the story). To think of it being torn down filled me with grief and fostered the idea of perhaps involving it, and the other car parks, in a piece for multiple pipe organs.

The idea is this - each of the three car parks has a large surface area on its top floor that could readily hold a specially constructed pipe organ (and, with cranes occupying every city block, it would not be difficult to lift the required materials up there). Also, the car parks are in line of sight of each other and, with only a half dozen streets between them, the sound of each organ would carry between them so they could harmonise and play together. The composition would, then, be written for three pipe organs, to be performed at sunrise, with an organist seated



at the top of each of the three car parks, trumpeting a volley of wind-blown chords across rooftops. I would call the piece *Scale*. Whether the community garden folk would accept this as suitable to commemorate the construction of their new planter beds was a question for another time.

Looking through my photos today, now back at home after that week of teaching, which I'll finish on in a moment, I realise that perhaps I wasn't just inspired to work on the organ composition because of a curious sense of scale that had recently enveloped me, but also perhaps because of what I was looking up at each morning as I waited for the bus to pick me up from the pub and take me to school.

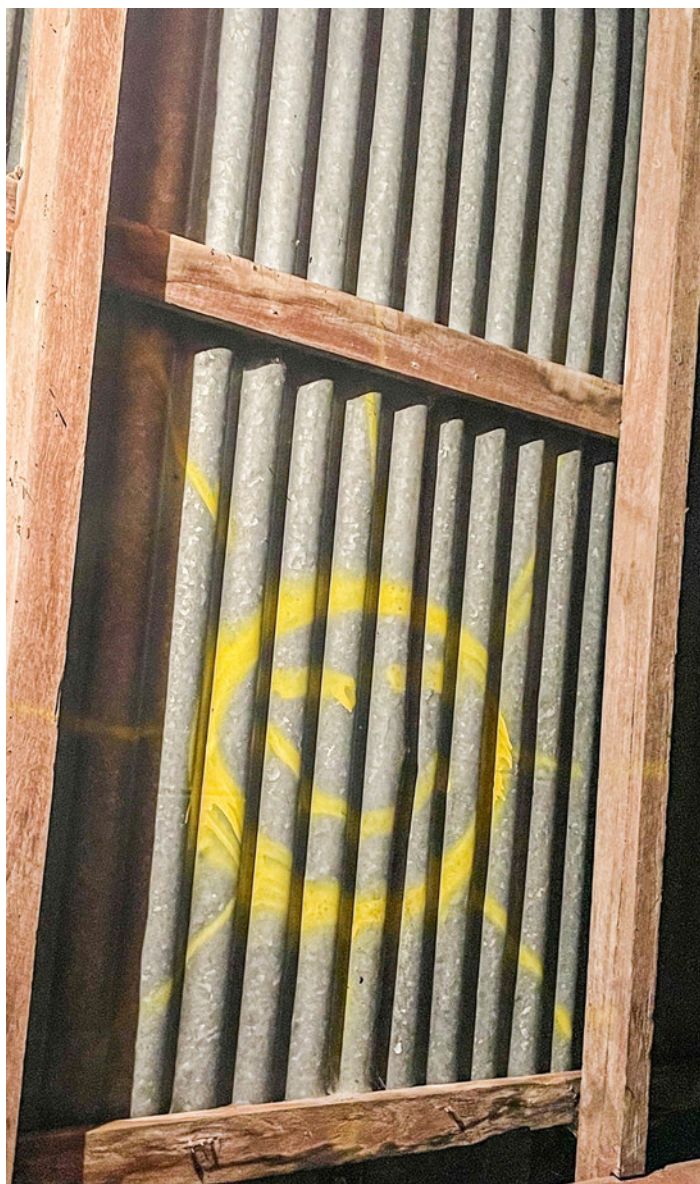
The awning of the bus stop was a sheet of corrugated iron, beneath which someone had painted a yellow sun with a smiley face. Undulations in the sheet look like columns of metal pipes, not unlike an organ I used to play on during my student days. How could you not sit beneath this awning, looking across the road to an icy river with a platypus swerving its way down to the reeds, and not feel a kinship with Bach. Rather than composing in the shape of a church, though, you write music to inhabit the peopleless gaps in city streets.

I enjoyed my week of teaching, and one moment lingers in my mind - a high school student, preparing to give a talk on a project, turns and says, Mr Smith, wish me tight lines. At first, I didn't know what the phrase meant,

but then I learned the student loved fishing, and to wish tight lines was to hope for good luck. That feels like the best advice a teacher could hope to give a student, to say nothing of wisdom for parenting.

Tight lines. I wonder what my version of this would be. Wish me empty multi-story car parks, perhaps, with, at times, a little companion by my side, and the grace to recognise that, like air moving through a pipe, I'm just passing through.

Hamilton, November, 2022







Craig lives in Hamilton, New South Wales with his wife, daughter and son. He is a school teacher and is the author of the novel 'A Complicated Surgery Will Take Place On The Beach Tonight' and the filmed essay 'Beyond Correct and Incorrect Nature'.

This is his third book.



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